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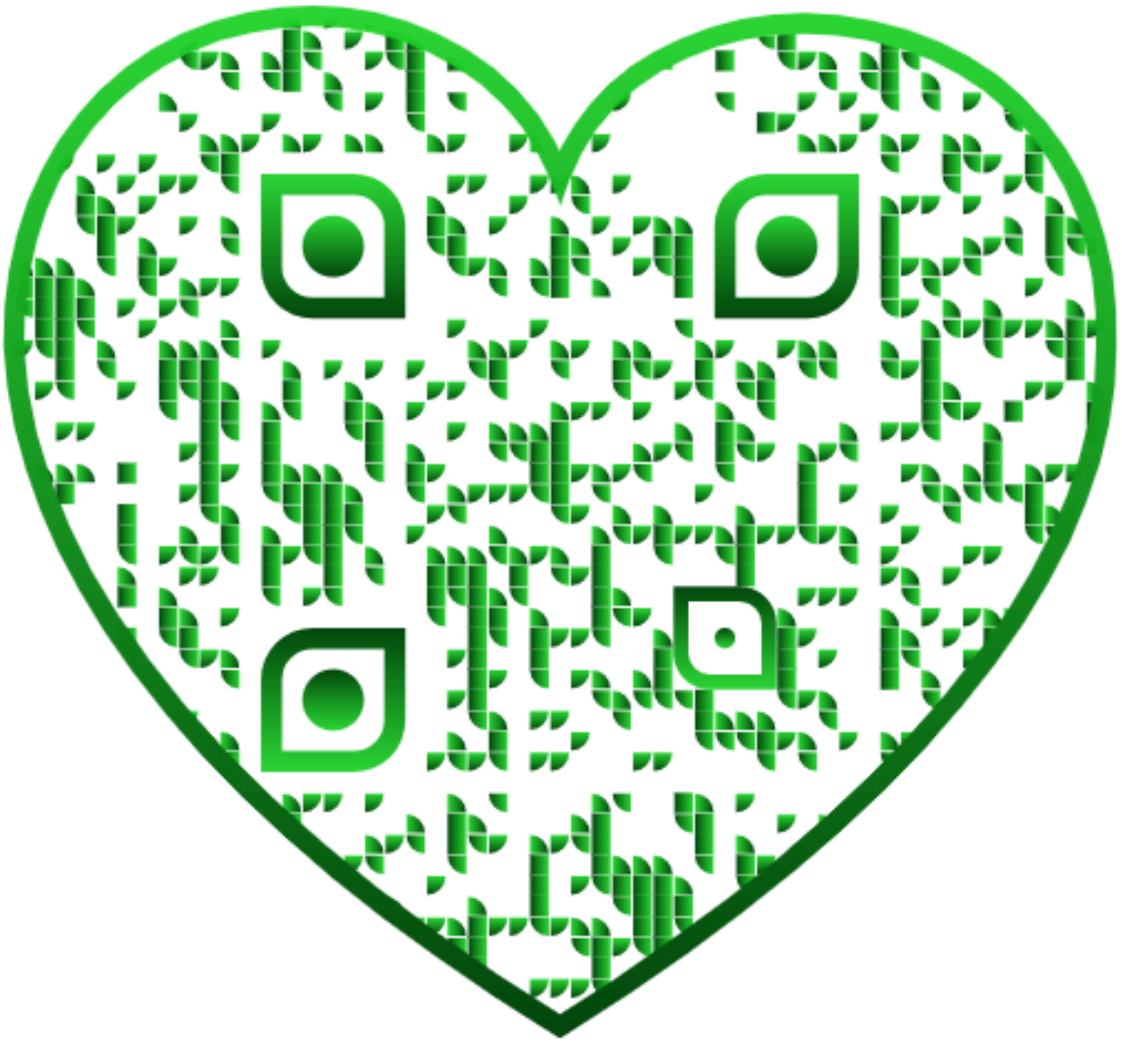
Blancmange

Neil Arthur Connects The Dots

KAITLYN AURELIA SMITH / UNLOVED / PYE CORNER AUDIO / JOCKSTRAP / PAUL OAKENFOLD / LARAAJI

JUST DESSERTS



WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND

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What a total treat it is to have Blancmange main man Neil Arthur on the cover of this month's Electronic Sound, albeit a slightly dotty version of him. Can you see what we did there?

As one of the exemplar electronic duos of the early 1980s, Blancmange snuck cool and arty pop into the charts thanks to Neil Arthur's skewed lyrics, Stephen Luscombe's memorable keyboard lines, and some fine record sleeves. The supremely catchy 'Living On The Ceiling' gave the pair their defining hit and was followed by a long string of UK Top 40 singles over the next two or three years. They departed gracefully in 1986 after just three albums, two of them certified as gold discs. And that, it seemed, was that.

Fast forward to 2011 and Blancmange were back. 'Blanc Burn', the title a play on Blackburn, a couple of miles along the road from Neil's home town, marked the beginning of a new era so prolific that it's been hard to keep up. In the last 11 years, there have been no less than 13 Blancmange albums, plus three more from Fader, Neil's side project with synthmeister Benge, who is also now the other half of the main pudding, Stephen Luscombe having sadly stood aside due to an ongoing health issue. It's a track record that threatens to put The Fall in the shade. In fact, you might even think of Neil as a benign synthpop Mark E Smith, a wordsmith whose inventive lyrics have long set the band apart.

This purple patch shows no sign of tailing off, with the group back on London Records, the label that paved the way to their initial success. Their new album, 'Private View', is a corker, a glorious example of left-field synthpop that's up there with those early gold discs. It's as at home on daytime radio as it is on the shelf of the most ardent Minimal Wave collector, but then that's where Blancmange have always been. And as well as making great records, Neil Arthur gives fabulous interviews, skipping between subjects, telling endless anecdotes, offering interesting opinions, and all without missing a beat. He is, as our writer Bob Fischer says, a master at joining the dots. Hence this month's cover image.

We have loads more interviews this month – Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith, Unloved, Pye Corner Audio, Jockstrap, Paul Oakenfold, Laraaji and more – plus we also have some exciting news for those of you who enjoy a bit of digital entertainment as well as nice-smelling print magazines. We've just revamped our website, which will now feature a growing archive of articles from back issues of the mag and regular live sessions filmed and recorded exclusively by Electronic Sound. Get yourself over to electronicsound.co.uk and take a look.

Electronically yours,
Push and Mark

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HANNA TUULIKKI AND TOMMY PERMAN: 'ECHO IN THE DARK'

Arbroath, Scotland

SEPTEMBER 2022

WORDS: ANTON SPICE
PICTURE: LAURENCE WINRAM

There are 18 species of bat in the UK, each with their own unique sound. The Brandt's bat makes a dry click, the noctule more of a rhythmic chick-chock. The serotine makes an acid slap, the Daubenton's a percussive thrum, while the lesser horseshoe emits an otherworldly warbling reminiscent of a dub laser. Inaudible to human ears, these echolocation calls can only be picked up by using a bat detector – a humbling reminder that even silence is full of noise we cannot hear.

For Finnish-English artist, composer and performer Hanna Tuulikki, it was the squelchy, lysergic sound of the soprano pipistrelle that struck her like a Roland TB-303 from the ether. Beyond the realm of human hearing lay a sample pack of ecological proportions, so when Tuulikki was approached by the arts residency programme at Hospitalfield in Arbroath, Scotland, there was only one project she wanted to pursue.

Developed in collaboration with producer Tommy Perman, 'Echo In The Dark' features music made entirely from bat echolocation sound pulses and samples of Tuulikki's own voice. After releasing two tracks on Edinburgh label Blackford Hill in July, the pair held a series of "silent bat raves" at the start of September, the costumed duo playing their music alongside dancers, lasers and freaky acid bat faces projected onto surrounding trees.

Engaging with bat echolocation feels particularly suited to Tuulikki's work. She calls her vocal practice "mimesis" – the imitation or emulation of the more-than-human world – and often records herself in situ, as if to capture an acoustic picture of her own embodied environment. Yet out in the woods at dusk, bat detecting becomes as much about moving as it does listening. Tuulikki says that what emerges, before any sound has even been recorded, is more like a form of multi-species *choreography*.

"Obviously there is this tuning in on a sonics level," Tuulikki explains. "But you're also engaged so physically because you actually have to move your body in relation to the bats."

"Watch people while they're bat detecting," Perman adds, "and they do begin to dance."

Alongside the local Tayside Bat Group, Tuulikki built an archive of bat sounds which she shared with Perman to use as source material. Drawing on 50 years of electronic music history and a mutual love for the Hyperdub label, the pair then crafted 13 tracks, each of which takes a different bat as its lead.

"It was almost like, 'What kind of dance music is this bat making?'," Tuulikki says. "How can we bring that out?"

"There's so much syncopation in the Daubenton's bat, it was really inspiring to make music with," Perman continues. "It just instantly lent itself to certain drum patterns which, almost untreated, made this incredible groove." It's genuinely hard to believe the resulting piece of peak-time acid house was made entirely out of ultrasonic pulses.

Perhaps more than anything, 'Echo In The Dark' speaks to a playfulness that has been in short supply recently. Tuulikki says she is making music from a place of joy for the first time in years. Under the trees of Hospitalfield, in the presence of the bats that lent their calls to the music, they hope to share that feeling with others too.

"Oh my goodness!" she exclaims, excitedly. "What better way to feel connection than to bring together a group of people to dance to bat rhythms and frequencies?"

Never mind the bat cave. Welcome to the bat rave.

The 'Echo In The Dark' seven-inch is out now on Blackford Hill

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Blancmange
‘Living On The Ceiling’ / ‘Some Times These’
Transparent pink vinyl seven-inch

This month’s exclusive seven-inch features two slabs of classic synthpop from the mighty Blancmange – recorded exactly 40 years apart

‘LIVING ON THE CEILING’

The A-side of our Blancmange seven-inch was the group’s breakthrough hit, peaking at Number Seven in the UK charts in December 1982.

“I wrote the lyrics for ‘Living On The Ceiling’ when I was still at art college,” says Blancmange frontman Neil Arthur. “It must have been the beginning of my second year, because I remember putting the words in a diary I’d picked up when I had my summer job with the London Borough of Harrow. The title came about because it felt like *everything* was upside down.

“A little while later, I moved into a housing association place in Wood Green. It had a little room at the back, which I commandeered as a rehearsal space. Well, once we’d got rid of the rats. Stephen Luscombe used to come round and one day he’d borrowed a Roland 808 drum machine from Andy Garnham, a lovely man from a great band called Shoc Corridor. Check them out if you don’t know them. Stephen had his Bontempi organ set up on the ironing board and we recorded the drums from the 808 onto a cassette. I got my guitar and I started playing ‘Daa daa da dee dee…’ along to it all.

“As we were working on the song, I made a mistake when I was playing the melody. I wasn’t much of a musician at that point and I was following the wrong scale, but what I did sounded quite exotic. We’d been bringing two tape recorders to the rehearsals because we wanted to multitrack ourselves, and we stopped and said, ‘Hang on a minute, let’s play that back’. So the melody was a mistake, but how fortuitous was that? In the end, my mistake took us all the way to the Great Pyramids in Egypt, which was where we filmed the video for the single because of the exotic feeling the melody gave to the song.”

‘SOME TIMES THESE’

The slowly building and effortlessly catchy ‘Some Times These’ is a pivotal track on ‘Private View’, Blancmange’s superb new album.

“I’d been thinking about all the stuff we’ve been going through over the last couple of years and this was literally a sigh,” notes Neil. “You know, ‘Bloody hell, some times, these…’. And I loved the different possibilities for wordplay – ‘Some times, these’ and ‘Sometimes, these…’. I’ve always done that, going back to songs like ‘Blind Vision’. I’m not sure whether it relates to my dyslexia and how I can misconstrue things. There have been a few malapropisms in Blancmange lyrics over the years!

“I wanted to keep the instrumentation of this track as simple as I could. There are kosmische and motorik references, but then most people know about my love of Neu!, Can and Cluster. Especially Neu!. The wonderful Benge is not just a great programmer of synths, he’s a fantastic drummer too, so we had a lot of fun working on that groove. Mr David Rhodes is also on there with his axe, putting his guitar on top of my one-string efforts.

“‘Some Times These’ actually has aspects of the stuff that I wrote when I was working for the London Borough of Harrow all those years ago. I’m thinking of the chug-chug-chug of ‘I Can’t Explain’, ‘I’ve Seen The Word’ and ‘Waves’. I still start songs with those very simple rhythms on a guitar. That’s another thing that comes from Neu!, but also from Young Marble Giants, one of my all-time favourite bands. They were a massive influence on Blancmange’s change from experimental sounds to structured songs. If I hadn’t heard their ‘Colossal Youth’ album, I don’t think that would have ever happened.”

THE FRONT

3 Welcome

4 Opening Shot

6 Reader Offer

11 Tony Rolando

12 Jim Ottewill

14 Paul Oakenfold

17 Alexander Robotnick

18 Needs Must

20 Tron

22 Laraaji

25 O‘o

26 Maddalena Fagandini

28 Healing Force Project

31 Tan Cologne

32 Rich Aucoin

FEATURES

36 Blancmange

50 Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith

56 Aphex Twin

63 Pye Corner Audio

66 Unloved

71 Jockstrap

76 Neu!
78 Marxist Love Disco Ensemble, The Rowan Amber Mill, Hashbrown, Unloved
79 Grandamme, Paddy Mulcahy, Minimal Schlager, Lyzza
80 Ondness, Mike Dickinson, Sudan Archives, Jeigo
81 Ian William Craig, Dialog, Andy Fosberry, Elif Yalvac
82 O-Shin, Pale Blue Eyes, Nug, Holmes + Atten Ash
83 Christina Vantzou / Michael Harrison / John Also Bennett, Darkroom, Danny Mulhern, Ametrom
84 Gemma Cullingford, Skudge, Cleared, Altered Images
85 Marsen Jules, Polly Scattergood, Dienne, Jockstrap
86 Gabe Gurnsey, Stereolab, Krishna Goineau
87 Monolithe Noir, Jazxing, Mark Peters
88 Halina Rice, Marsha Fisher, Frogman
89 The Comet Is Coming, Danalogue
90 Mike Batt, ‘Music For Suicide Prevention’
91 Editors, Unhappybirthday, Badge Époque Ensemble
92 Nightswimmer, Om Unit, Beokraft,
93 Cosey Fanni Tutti, Expert Sleepers
94 Sarah Davachi
95 A Taut Line, The Advisory Circle, Hekla
96 ‘Visions Of Darkness (In Iranian Contemporary Music): Volume II’, Alvin Curran, William Orbit
97 ‘Joe Meek’s Tea Chest Tapes: The Telstar Story’, Blancmange
98 Fat Roland

THE MOOG COOKBOOK

Long-awaited Dr Robert bio lands

It's been a long time in the making, but Albert Glinsky's tome, 'Switched On: Bob Moog And The Synthesizer Revolution', } is finally here. Glinsky, a world-renowned Moog scholar (and sometime contributor to Electronic Sound), was granted unprecedented access to both Moog's personal archives and to family members to produce this hefty 496-page study of one man's extraordinary contribution to the evolution of electronic music.

With chirpy chapter titles like 'Slipping Backwards On A Banana Peel' and 'The Flushing Geek', plus a foreword by film director Francis Ford Coppola, the book tells the crazy story of how an electronics engineer born in the 1930s changed the sound of pop music, while not always successfully navigating the baffling musical countercultures of the 1960s and 70s, or the horrors of international business and finance. It's an inspiring read. You can order a copy now from the Bob Moog Foundation shop for $39.95, prior to its UK publication later this year. Check out the limited edition Moog prints while you're there. **bobmoogfoundation.myshopify.com**

FAREWELL TRANSMISSION

A new chapter for Bluetooth

The next generation of Bluetooth is officially here. Recently announced by the Bluetooth Special Interest Group, the completion of the full set of LE (low energy) Audio specifications will enable a new generation of Bluetooth audio products to take flight, providing higher quality at lower power. LE Audio also adds the novel Auracast broadcast sound, enabling a transmitter like a smartphone to broadcast one or more streams to an unlimited number of receivers.

"Today is a proud day for the Bluetooth SIG member community," says CEO Mark Powell. "Our members overcame the many challenges placed on them these past few years to complete the largest specification development project in the history of the Bluetooth SIG." **bluetooth.com**

BIOSPHERE

Evolution Music release "bioplastic vinyl"

The amount of plastic used in manufacturing vinyl has always been a stone in the shoe of climate-campaigning artists, but industry collective Evolution Music may have found a solution in the form of "bioplastic vinyl", which replaces oil with sugars and starches. A new EP, released in partnership with environmental coalition Music Declares Emergency, is being touted as "the world's first" plant-based vinyl record. It features tracks from Bicep, Angel Olsen, Black Country, New Road, and more.

"It's a no-brainer," says Fay Milton, Savages drummer and MDE co-founder. "Why use fossil fuel-based products when you can now simply choose not to? It feels like the Evolution Music team have quietly created a revolution." **musicdeclares.net**

WHAT ARE YOU LISTENING TO?

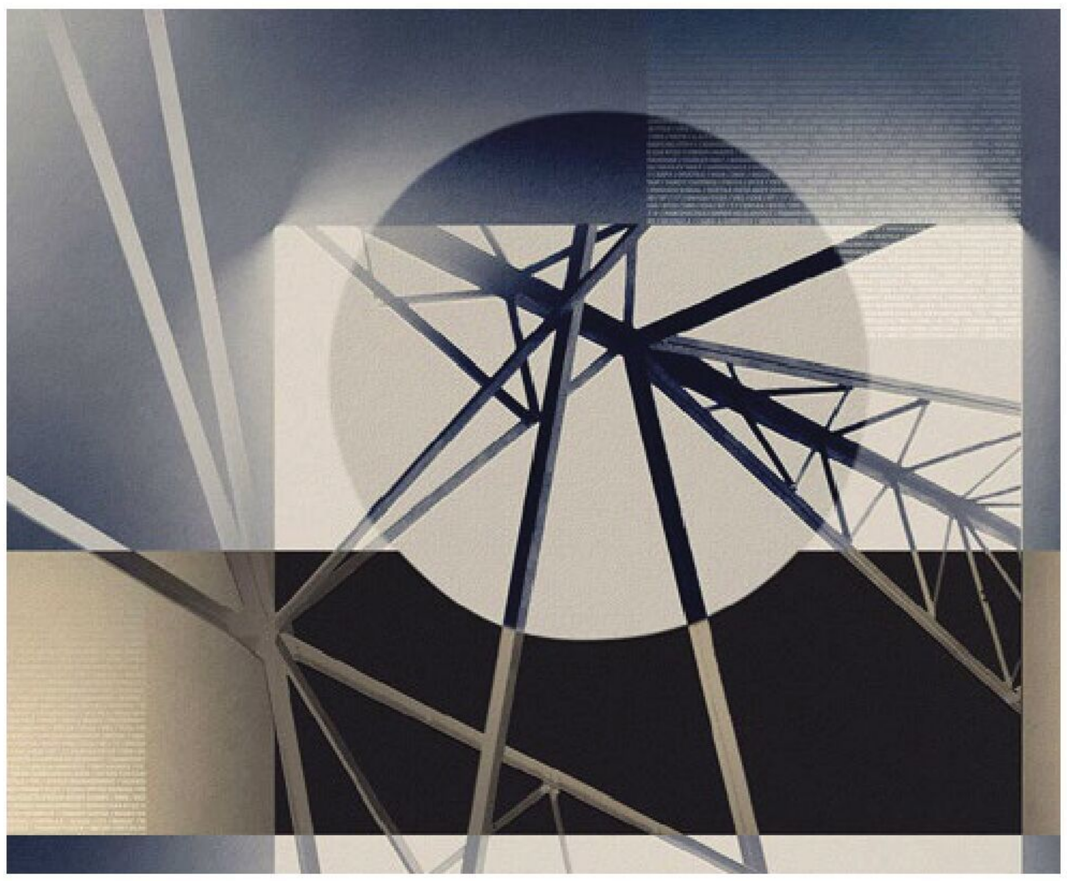
New music pod attracts Björk and more

'Listening' is a new podcast about how "the small act of listening can lead to big ideas". How so? Well, the series invites a number of artists to make original compositions inspired by their surroundings, before a discussion about the music and their lives takes place. The musicians that have taken part aren't half bad, either. The first series features Björk, Laraaji and Mdou Moctar, among others. You can listen to everything free. **open.spotify.com**

MUSIC FOR EVER AND EVER

New Eno LP incoming

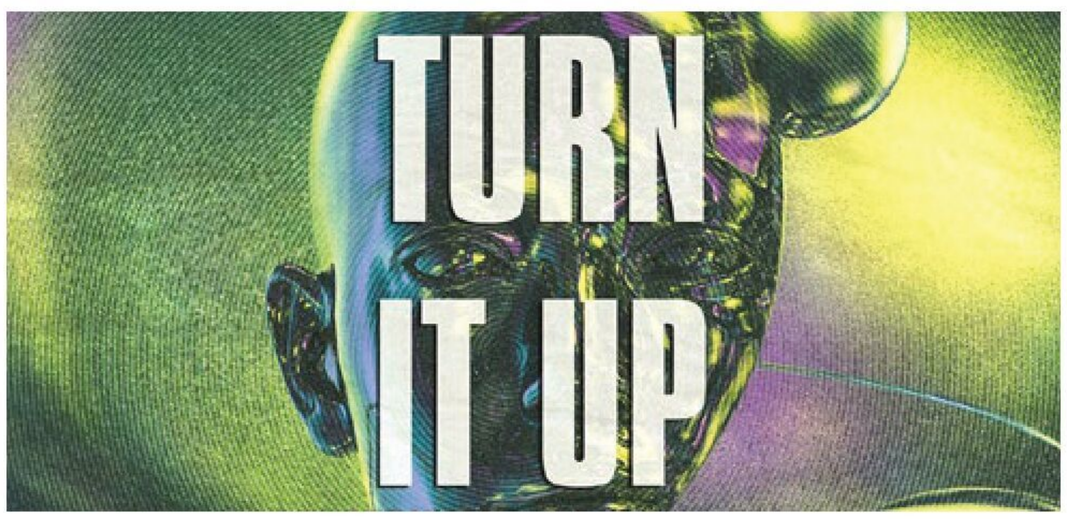
Brian Eno has announced a new album, his first since 2017's 'Reflection', which was a 54-minute excerpt of generative music produced by an app, released by Warp. 'ForeverAndEverNoMore' sees Eno generating the music himself this time, and he's also singing again, as on the 2016 album 'The Ship'. There are various versions available for pre-order, including a limited edition clear vinyl LP with an art print. The CD contains the full version of 'Making Gardens Out Of Silence', which was originally part of an audio installation Eno contributed to the Serpentine Gallery's long-term interdisiplinary programme about climate emergency, 'Back To Earth'. The release date is 14 October, so pre-orders are bright and early for those ever-extending vinyl production timescales. **enoshop.co.uk**



LOUD AND CLEAR

Series tells history of drum 'n' bass

If you liked BBC Radio 4's ace 'Techno: A Social History' show, you're going to love their new podcast series exploring the history of drum 'n' bass. Across eight 15-minute episodes, 'Turn It Up' explores the genre's humble beginnings through interviews with scene stalwarts like DJ Storm and DJ Flight, before hurtling through how it became recognisable around the globe. Along the way, you'll hear about how Goldie's debut album turned heads, when Roni Size & Reprazent pipped Spice Girls and Radiohead to the 1997 Mercury Music Prize, and about the tragedies when the big music industry execs leeches came calling. After airing on BBC Radio 1, the episodes are now available to listen to online. **bbc.co.uk/sounds**



PULSE

TONY ROLANDO

Renowned instrument maker turns producer

WHO?

Since you can't chuck a patch cable these days without hitting someone who's dabbling in modular gear, Tony Rolando isn't an entirely unknown quantity. As the founder of Make Noise music, the North Carolina-based manufacturer of some of the best-loved gear in that particular synth space, his sonic imprint is on loads of today's electronic sounds, albeit at a slight remove. As an artist, however, he stands as more of a newcomer.

WHY TONY ROLANDO?

His first outing, 'Old Cool Echoes', saw a limited run of very pink cassettes released in December 2021. The eight tracks feature Rolando's much-heralded style – otherworldy, yet catchy digital vibes with the occasional mangled film sample tossed in (special attention should be paid to the seven-minute version of 'Vanished' released earlier this year as a single). But his latest long-player, 'Breakin' Is a Memory', is not only the sound of someone hitting their stride, but one of the best electronic releases we've heard in a while. Super-modern and thoroughly engaging, the new tracks have upped the gravitas quotient. From the deep bass drones on 'Running Toward An Edge' through to the title track and its eerie 1980s skateboarding sample, Rolando manages to pull off an immersive experience that demands replay.

TELL US MORE...

Logic might dictate that a fair portion of what's heard here was probably born out of Rolando's experiments with Make Noise gear as it was headed for production. But that is not the case, apparently. "One of the things that used to prevent me from making music was that I would have prototypes in my little studio space," says Rolando. "Inevitably I would find something wrong or something I didn't like, and I'd dip from a musician's state of mind to an engineering state of mind. While those two minds can inform each other, for me at least, they don't necessarily work together simultaneously. I kind of have to pick one or the other."

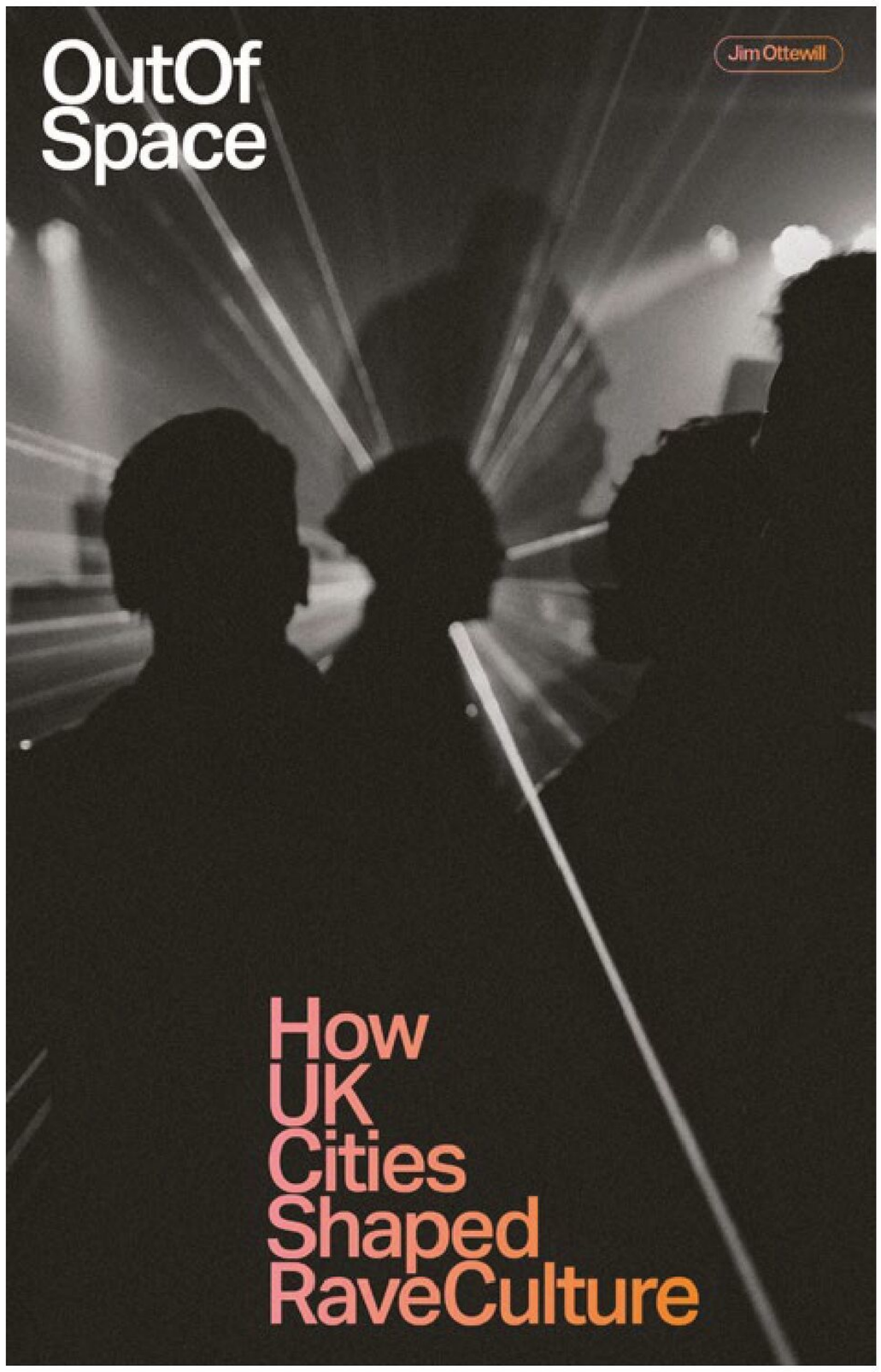
JOE SILVA

'Breakin' Is A Memory' is out now on Bandcamp

NEW HAÇIENDAS MUST BE BUILT

Jim Ottewill's new book, 'Out Of Space', explores the past, present and future of nightclubs, before proposing radical change. Doors are open, let's dive in...

WORDS: BEN GILBERT



The word "Disconecropolis" jumps from the pages of journalist Jim Ottewill's book, 'Out Of Space'. Deployed by The Office For Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), the concept addresses, in somewhat morbid terms, the deceased clubbing pulse of a European capital city.

But the Dutch architecture company is not referring to 1970s Berlin, where Iggy Pop and David Bowie mythically stalked the streets powered by a diet of milk, red peppers and hard drugs. This is now and the location is London.

"We're all too aware of how money talks in urban settings, with cities usually marching to the beat of property developers rather than DJs," writes Ottewill. "London, in particular, has shed dozens of nightclubs since the 90s, in large part due to the impact of the development of residential and commercial enterprises."

Ottewill reveals that more than 50 per cent of the city's clubs shut between 2010 and 2016. Even more disturbingly, these figures are pre-Covid, which further exacerbated the decline in functioning venues.

It is from this worrisome backdrop that Ottewill begins 'Out Of Space', and as part of his thinking, seeks to "define a nightclub in the 2020s".

In the process, he interviews Dimitri Hegemann, owner of Berlin's iconic Tresor, who outlines his ambitions to incorporate a venue in the redevelopment of Hotel Igman in Sarajevo. Hegemann envisions this facility becoming a "cultural lighthouse", a community setting about more than those who populate the dancefloor during a rather regimented – if hedonistic – weekly period.

"You can see examples of it in the UK," says Ottewill, who believes "malleability" is essential to the future of clubbing. "SWG3 in Glasgow is a versatile space. There are offices, and they also own the venue, which is key to survival. They were very proactive during Covid, doing things outside and being canny in how they responded to the restrictions and creating an ecosystem beyond the dancefloor. Their spaces can be used for an Optimo night and they have Galvanizers, an amazing rave room. But they can also do corporate events and respond to demand. I think it provides a strong foundation in terms of growing and evolving."

It connects back with the work of OMA, who were approached by Ministry Of Sound when researching a planned renovation of their historic but dated Elephant and Castle venue. Although this overhaul never materialised, many of the findings percolated into key themes that link up with Ottewill's findings.

"Part of their thinking was that nightclubs are only stereotypically used for a small percentage of the week," says Ottewill. "Their idea was to make it work all the time, work hard and create more value."

Far from being London-centric, though, 'Out Of Space' covers the whole of the UK, and does so intentionally. Raised in Oldham, Ottewill spent much of his childhood in Manchester before going on to study in Sheffield where he ran club nights. He went on to work as a journalist in London and has now returned to the north of England, settling in Liverpool, where the problems are just as worrying. In the book, Ottewill's figures show that the total number of nightclubs across the UK have halved from 3,144 to 1,733 in the decade after 2005.

"It's not about this glorious age of clubbing during 1989 and 1990," he explains, expanding on the remit of the book. "Obviously, that was a seismic shift in youth culture, music and drugs. The next generation will have similar experiences. But where will they be? In nightclubs? In the metaverse? Who knows? It's not about nostalgia or looking back. Dance music is very much future-facing and everyone's experience is equally valid.

"Given how many clubs have been lost, the stats are pretty bleak," he argues. "The pressures are still on financially, but there's also this real urge and need for people to come back together and dance and have those experiences everyone has been craving."

The Night Time Industries Association and Night Czars – now operating in Bristol, London and Manchester – have recently taken up the slack previously left hanging by local authorities.

Ottewill, who claims better organisation and louder voices as a cause for optimism, also speaks enthusiastically about innovations taking place in club technology, citing "the perfect club" ambitions of James Murphy (LCD Soundsystem, DFA Records) and Soulwax's Despacio sound system – a transportable, 50,000-watt, state-of- the-art, vinyl-only system powered by McIntosh and Jordan Acoustics. There is measured anticipation around virtual environments, too.

"The metaverse is still so fresh and uncharted," says Ottewill. "Like the Wild West in some ways. Tech people are pushing it forward, particularly at the intersection with video game worlds. They're keen to make it this experiential environment that goes far beyond avatars."

He also welcomes initiatives from other clubbing meccas. July's Rave The Planet in Berlin was accompanied by a renewed bid for the city's techno scene to receive official UNESCO World Heritage status.

"As the wheels turn across generations, there will be people coming into power who will be familiar with nightclubs, who've had experiences and are genuinely into it," he says. "Nightclubs should be treated with the respect they deserve and seen as a cultural asset rather than a problem, which is how they have often been seen historically."

'Out Of Space' is out now, published by Velocity Press

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RE-RE-RE-REMIX

Max Cooper invites fans to reinterpret his music

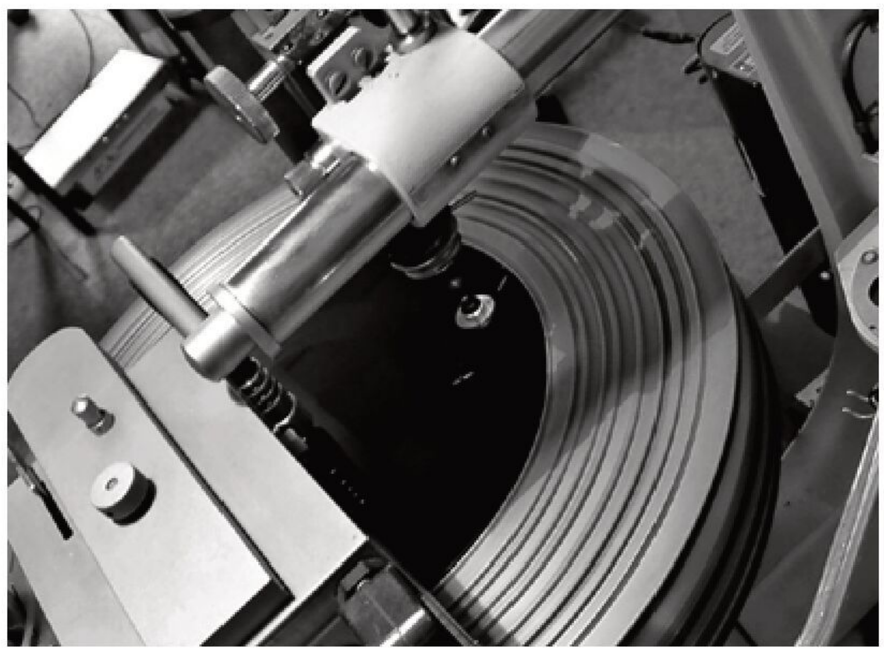
DAWs and cameras at the ready, because eminent electronicist Max Cooper has just launched a "multidisciplinary" remix challenge of 'A Model Of Reality', the standout track from his latest album, 'Unspoken Words', which was released earlier this year. Using the track's stems (available from the Mesh Discord channel), you can remix the song in whatever form you like, whether through music, film, painting, poetry, sculpture and more.

"'A Model Of Reality' is one of the tracks from 'Unspoken Words' that could go in a number of different directions, which I toyed with during the writing phase," says Cooper. "I'm looking forward to experiencing what you can make from it." The winning entry will be released on Mesh, Cooper's own label, later this year. **meshmeshmesh.net**

PRESSING MATTERS

New indie-facing vinyl facility

What do you do when your independent label nearly goes bankrupt because delays in vinyl production are choking your supply chain? You start your own pressing plant, of course. Matter Of Fact is one such plant in Germany which says it won't be working with major imprints, instead focusing their efforts on the long-suffering indies. They can press up to 30,000 records a month at their facility in Güstrow, a city in north-east Germany, and are encouraging clients to come there to watch their records being made, much like Jack White's Third Man operation in Detroit. Jack White, meanwhile, has been urging major labels to open their own factories so they can produce their 300,000 Adele albums without disadvantaging smaller distributors. **matteroffact.de**



UNDER THE INFLUENCE

With his 'Shine On' album released earlier this year, superstar DJ and producer **Paul Oakenfold** talks us through his formative influences

INTERVIEW: JO KENDALL

FATHER FIGURE

"I was born in Mile End, and then we moved to Highbury. My dad was a musician and had a skiffle band, and my mum was a chef so there was always hot food, music and love in the air. That inspired me to go into both of those industries and, initially, I studied to be a chef in French cuisine. My Love of music, though, was led by my father.

"When I got older, I wondered why I knew the lyrics to Elvis or Beatles songs, and then I realised it was because of him. What was wonderful was that years later, after my father had passed away, I was asked [in 2003] to remix a song by Elvis Presley and I went for my father's favourite, 'Rubberneckin'', and they allowed me to dedicate it to him on the sleeve. That was a big moment in my life."

LET THE MUSIC PLAY

"School was tough for me as I was diagnosed as dyslexic and the teachers didn't really know what dyslexia was back then. I really suffered. I was shy and embarrassed, and I didn't want to be the person they asked to stand up in class to read a paragraph of a book. The light at the end of the tunnel that shone brightly was music.

"However, once I left school, I worked ridiculously hard in kitchens – 10am to 11pm, four days a week – and had one day at college then Sunday and Monday off. I never had a Friday or a Saturday night out, like all my friends. After a few years I reached a point of, 'Is this what life's all about? There must be more to it'. I said to my mum, 'I've got to try music'. I played keyboards and guitar – not too well, to be honest – but I was just gonna go for it.

"My parents were encouraging but my dad said, 'What are you going to *do*?'. I wanted to be in a band, but no one was around for that, so I went to work in A&R [at Champion Records], and I got into DJing. Music opened the door to my life. I've seen a lot of the world since from over a box of records."

THE TRAVEL BUG

"A love of travel came at an early age from my grandad. He worked for an agency, organising trips through Spain. Although our family really couldn't afford it, we'd get to go to out there, and that was the beginning of me wanting to see the world.

"I've been able to do this for 40 years as my job. I've learned about and experienced other countries, histories and cultures first-hand. My favourite places are Tokyo, Buenos Aires and Shanghai – you'll note these are all cities. I've been on thousands of beaches all over the world, and I've seen sunsets like no other, but I'm not the kind of guy who wants to sit on a beach.

"Cities bring a lot to the table – they're exciting, cutting-edge, dangerous. But I've also played at the Great Wall Of China, in a 1,000 year-old rainforest, at Ushuaia in Argentina – which is 600 miles from Antarctica, at Mount Everest base camp, in Area 51… those are the places I look forward to going to as they're much more of an achievement. We raise money for charities with some events and it pushes me to do new things. Two weeks on a beach in the Maldives doesn't interest me."

REDISCOVERING FOOD

"I've spent 25 years falling back in love with food. Because of travel, I was trying all these cuisines, and I realised that I had a real passion for it. In my early days, working so hard as a chef took a toll on me. I resented it. I didn't want to cook, I didn't want to go to any restaurants. But the older I became, I started to really enjoy going to restaurants all around the world, trying the cuisine and then attempting to cook it.

"I post a lot of dishes on social media. I share the knowledge – 'If you're in Paris, go here. If you're in Maidstone and you want the best fish and chips, go here' [laughs, as he's currently in Maidstone seeing his mum]. These days, if I have a night off I won't be in a nightclub. I'll be in a restaurant having dinner."

BEING A DAD, SHARING THE WISDOM

"In the last few years I've lost my father and a few members of my family, and a lot of challenges came out of that. I now have children and different kinds of responsibilities. My actions will become a legacy to them, and I want to set the right example so I spend a lot of time thinking about that.

"I sit down and explain to my son moments that mean a lot to me. I want him to understand what to do in life and how to do it. For example, when I was a kid my father said, 'You've gotta save for a rainy day,' and I didn't know what that meant. Does it mean that it rains? No, it means that one day in your life something may come upon you that you need money for. You might be sick, or need it to help someone. That rainy day appeared for everyone a few years ago. Like many, I didn't work for 17 months, but I still had to support and pay for my children's education, my ex's costs, my mortgage. I covered it with my savings.

"I also thought about wrapping up this stage of my career and sharing my story with both my family and the public. If a working-class dyslexic kid can grow up writing music for films and games, travelling the world and living in Hollywood, then why not share my experiences? It's about you, the reader out there, not me. *You* can do it, you don't have to be held back. It's a story of positivity and that's why I wrote a book. If 1,000 people buy it and it helps one person I'll be happy."

'Shine On' is out now on Perfecto.
'Ready Steady Go: My Unstoppable Journey In Dance'
is also out now, published by Wellbeck

TABLE MAGIC TRICKS

Vertere bring the style

The DG-S1 is the latest turntable from respected British manufacturer Vertere Acoustics, and it's a total eye-catcher. Boasting higher resolution listening than its predecessor (the DG-1 model) with an updated tonearm to improve the counterweight, the platter has also been improved to give better playback, and each deck comes with a pre-installed Magneto cartridge. Released this month, they're retailing at £3,550.

vertereacoustics.com

HOT OFF THE PRESS

New synth mag from down under

Modul8 is a brand new synth print magazine that rose out of lockdown in Victoria, Australia. Promising "56 pages of utter synth geekery", its premiere issue features interviews with Detroit and Berlin-based technoist Dub Monitor, YouTube synth philosopher JAde Wii, Make It Up Club veteran Stevie Richards, and much more.

"We just wanted something that felt a bit deeper than social media," says co-founder Phil Coyle. "We both remembered how important and influential magazines had been on us, so we decided to try and make something that lasted longer than a swipe." You can bag the first issue now for $15.
modul8magazine.limitedrun.com

TOUCH IT

Label celebrates 40th in style

Since its inception in London in 1982, Jon Wozencroft's Touch imprint has been responsible for a wealth of "audiovisual productions and live events". Focusing on individual artist development and mentorship over 40 years of experimental electronic excursions, Touch has worked with an array of respected artists, including the late, great Philip Jeck and the Austrian avant-electroid Fennesz. Wozencroft has been marking four impressive decades with a series of events in Los Angeles, Berlin, Chicago, Brussels, and on 1 October, the Touch roadshow rolls into Cafe Oto in London, with performances from Norwegian artist Jana Winderen and Slowdive drummer-cum-sound ecologist Simon Scott, plus more. You can order advance tickets now for £16. **cafeoto.co.uk**

Touch.

ENIGMAS

Sweeping the forgotten corridors of sound, **Scott Blixen** sets his sights on **Alexander Robotnick**

If the "Italo" prefix makes you queasy, Alexander Robotnick could be all the healin' you'll be needin'. His exotic blend of *musica elettronica* bridged the gap between the downfall of disco and the rise of house, lighting up the dancefloors of Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles.

Behind the Russian-flavoured name stands Maurizio Dami, an Italian who further muddied the waters in 1983 with 'Problèmes D'Amour', an electro-disco 12-inch sung in French. Always more than a one-trick pony, after his initial triumphs Robotnick moved on to writing theatre soundtracks and collaborating with African, Indian and Kurdish musicians. And he still DJs. You can't help but assume this wide-ranging taste is the special sauce that enriches his work. At 72, he looks remarkably spry on this varied diet. Nevertheless, the legacy of 'Problèmes D'Amour' and his debut LP may be hard to surpass.

Post-disco producers explored a host of possibilities before house forged a new orthodoxy, but this fecundity led to a muddle of sub-genres. If electro-disco was born in Moroder's Munich Musicland, it found a warm embrace in the land of his birth. Robotnick was among an explosion of Italians who supplied desperate DJs, compelled to look further afield after disco flatlined.

Constructing functional dance tracks from drum machines and cheap synths was still a near-alchemical process at the time Robotnick made his mechanical disco-veries. An early adopter of the TB-303, he applied the Bass Line with finesse in a time before acid house. Robotnick's debut album, 'Ce N'Est Q'Un Début', takes us to a place where many roads meet. The metropolitan chic of 'Trans-Europe Express' happily co-exists with the primitivism of the proto-Italo classic 'I'm A Vocoder' by Gay Cat Park. It also shares DNA with contemporary coldwave luminaries Bal Paré and Deux, while stirring in slinky ethnographic flavourings.

Robotnick's hybridisation never feels forced. 'Problèmes D'Amour' marries chattering electro percussion to graceful disco with European elegance. The track made an Atlantic crossing in 1984 and was remixed by François Kevorkian, and this marriage-made-in-heaven saw it glide effortlessly onto US dancefloors.

I admit to a distaste for the term "intelligent dance music", which implies that making a floorfiller is grunt work. Robotnick's vision meant looking beyond genre boundaries, and he beat a path that dance music later followed. 'Problèmes D'Amour' is destined to be eulogised and remixed for generations to come, and while it may be tiresome for him that his first single will always be *the one*, making an era-defining record is beyond most mortals.

IN DEEP WATER

NASA release new sound pack of the ocean

When you think about the sounds of the sea, you probably hear waves lapping on the shore or whale songs. However, over the past 18 months, Nasa research scientist Ryan Vandermeulen and his brother Jon have been developing an online programme that merges ocean colour data with musical notes.

It started when Ryan saw a satellite image of Río De La Plata, and was struck by the "crazy swirls and whirls" of its offshore sediment plumes. What would this image sound like? Jon then created a "programmatic interface" that translated the image data into musical notes, creating "a natural palette for the ear". The resulting compositions wouldn't sound out of place on a Brian Eno album, and you can hear some of the soothing ambient music on the NASA website. **nasa.gov**

SAY HELLO

Soft Cell release live show on DVD

'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret… And Other Stories' is a new live album and DVD from Soft Cell. It was filmed in November 2021 at one of the duo's two sellout concerts at London's Eventim Apollo. Held in celebration of the 40th anniversary of 'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret', it features 24 tracks from their extensive discography, including cuts from the current album, 'Happiness Not Included', plus classics like 'Tainted Love' and 'Say Hello, Wave Goodbye'. Released on DVD via Live Here Now on 7 October, a vinyl edition is due early next year. **softcell.co.uk**

NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month, he revels in minimalist producer **Recondite**

Continuing the habit of over 30 years, I've been researching tunes spun by Andrew Weatherall for the book I'm writing with Nina Walsh and discovering many fresh rabbit holes to dive into with tail twitching.

An eight-hour set Andrew played at New York's ReSolute club in 2016 included a track called 'Tie In' by Recondite (aka Lorenz Brunner) from his 2012 debut album, 'On Acid'. A masterpiece of time-stopping, pin-drop minimalism, the track ignited an afternoon exploring the Berlin-based producer's music.

After a stretch gibbering like The Great Cornholio from 'Beavis And Butt-Head', the lifelong vinyl junkie in me sprang into action, and I procured half the catalogue I'd missed during my time off the radar (even if Helen and I had cavorted to Recondite on Ibiza in 2014, when he held a residency at Richie Hawtin's ENTER.).

Brunner's meticulous genius rears relentlessly from 'On Acid', as well as from the seven albums and the string of EPs he released up to 2022's 'Taum'. While long-players 'Hinterland' and 'Iffy' sculpted hauntingly diaphanous melodies over controlled dynamite groove-fondling, EPs like 'EC10' and 'Levo' pumped up into throbbing bison testicle territory. Yet everything he does carries its own intricate microsurgery – ethereal, glacially melodic and reshaping bass culture.

Brunner cites his rural Bavarian birthplace and its landscape as influences, his first forays created in a home studio surrounded by small voles in radioactive loincloths, who would join him in relocating to Berlin in 2009. Starting Plangent Records in 2011, Brunner exhaled an EP to good reviews before 'On Acid' manifested on the Absurd offshoot, Acid Test.

The set that initially grabbed my gonads remains the best route into Recondite's twinkling techno cascades, through the luminescent less-is-more skeletons on which he would refine his stripped-down electronic adornments of early deep house and techno blueprints. 'Petrichor' weaves a sepulchral spell that can only be described as chamber acid. Stealth-driven house tracks,including poignant 'Tie In', simmering 'Harbinger' and acid-lacerated 'Felicity', traverse deeply spaced panoramas shot with emotional catharsis and glorious melancholy. It's no surprise Andrew Weatherall rated him – Brunner's micro-crafting approach to electronic gem-cutting chimed with Andrew's latter work with Nina Walsh.

Back in Dorset, that same lady and I will be relaunching The Rabettes, which we started in 1994 with 'Bunny New Guinea Pig', and reactivating her Sabrettes label in the spirit of Bastard Bunny. Our comeback stormer will replace her and Andrew's cavies with Binky the singing dog. Somewhere, Lord Sabre may be digging out his swordstick and rabbit suit.

GET SOME SUN

Cosmic art from jazz icon

In his 45-year recording career, Sun Ra released an astonishing number of albums that tallies to well over 100. He was also one of the first black musicians to own an independent label – Saturn Records. Most of the sleeves for Sun Ra albums were totally DIY – plain white, handmade covers that the Afro visionary and members of his "Arkestra" would draw over while they were on the road. The fruits of these artistic labours have now been compiled into a fabulous hardback book – 'Art On Saturn: The Album Cover Art Of Sun Ra's Saturn Label' – the first comprehensive collection of all Saturn album covers. The 240-page book contains hundreds of the best hand-designed sleeves and disc labels, many of which are works of art in their own right, plus a series of essays, including one by the Sun Ra catalogue preservationist, Irwin Chusid. Published next month, you can preorder a copy now for $75. **fantagraphics.com**

COLD SPRING PRESENTS

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WELCOME TO THE JANGLE

Scottish post-punk gets the book it deserves

A performance by Vic Godard's Subway Sect, who supported The Clash at Edinburgh Playhouse in 1977, sowed the seeds for the hugely influential DIY post-punk scene in Scotland, spearheaded in Edinburgh by Fast Product (and the discordant Fire Engines), while the Glasgow contingents were led by Postcard (and Edwyn Collins's janglemeisters Orange Juice). These two fiercely independent record labels are at the heart of Douglas MacIntyre and Grant McPhee's 'Hungry Beat: The Scottish Independent Pop Underground Movement (1977-1984)', the definitive oral history of this scene. It features extensive interviews with Fast Product's maverick owners Bob Last and Hilary Morrison, and key players including members of The Human League (whose first release was on Fast Product, of course), Aztec Camera and The Go-Betweens. Published this month, a signed, limited edition hardback is available to order from Rough Trade for £30, with a seven-inch featuring Josef K and Fire Engines, or you can just bag the regular edition for £20. **roughtrade.com**

IN THE GROOVE

NY library begins lending wax

Some good news for local residents, as all card-carrying members of Brooklyn's Central Library can now borrow vinyl. Located in the New & Noteworthy room on the first floor, the collection currently holds well over 400 records, and a quick browse of their catalogue brings up a host of gems, from Talking Heads and Television classics, to Prince rarities which would normally cost a buck or two. The section also has a "listening station" so that members can plug-in before taking items out. With the library looking to rapidly increase its stock, it's an exciting development for analogue lovers, and one that you hope to see repeated in the UK. **bklynlibrary.org**

TIME MACHINE

Decades on from a time when you couldn't simply produce a film soundtrack on a laptop, sound design supervisor Michael Fremer reflects on what it was like to work with composer Wendy Carlos for Disney's 1982 sci-fi action-adventure, '**Tron**'

WORDS: JOE SILVA

Wendy Carlos has just come from her utility cupboard brandishing an electric wood router and is headed for the kitchen. Properly narked because guest chef Michael Fremer has scorched her butcher block with a sizzling wok, she's left the Chinese meal he's cooked to go cold, while she scrapes away at the damage.

"I felt terrible, but at the same time I was laughing my head off at the absurdity of what was going on," says Fremer.

Fremer and Carlos had been up against it ever since he'd hired her to come up with the music for Disney's 1982 sci-fi epic 'Tron'. Based on the story of an arcade owner who is sucked into the alternate reality of a corporate computer, it was one of the first films to flirt with computer-generated imagery (CGI). In his role as sound design supervisor, Fremer felt the veteran electronic music composer was a perfect choice to bring onto the project.

"I wanted to have a dramatic symphonic score that would be kind of the opposite of what the picture was going to look like," remembers Fremer. "So Wendy was going to do the score mostly on synthesiser, like she did with Stanley Kubrick's 'A Clockwork Orange', and then we were gonna add symphonic overdubs on top. That was the original idea."

But not long after Fremer arrived at Carlos' Manhattan studio from LA with the first reel of film, tight production schedules and tighter budgets meant that his plan would have to be scrapped.

"When they locked down the first reel, a lot of it was in black and white," he recalls. "They hadn't yet colourised it. So I flew to New York with it, and we watched it and blocked out what the music was gonna be like. But it didn't take long before the whole first reel changed, so all that work was useless."

The solution was to reverse course. Orchestrator Jorge Calandrelli was brought in to put Carlos' music in front of the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

Just four months before the film's release, the basis of the soundtrack was recorded onto tape with the help of a BBC remote truck that rolled up to the Royal Albert Hall in March 1982.

"Wendy scored it for the Royal Albert Hall organ and a 104-piece orchestra, but we had to do it in such a way as to leave room for the synthesiser parts," says Fremer. She also wrote pieces for a chorus that were recorded at Royce Hall on the UCLA campus, so all these parts had to be put together. It was a huge undertaking, made more difficult because the picture couldn't be locked until very late in the process. In the meantime, we had to invent synthesiser parts and sound effects for all these things that were on the screen."

Many of those sounds had to be generated on the fly back in California with a team headed up by Oscar-winning sound effects guru Frank Serafine, as fresh images were still coming out of the studio.

"The animators were adding all these visual effects that we weren't seeing," says Fremer. "So we'd finish a reel, and they'd say, 'Oh, we have some new stuff to show you!', and there'd be all these things that you couldn't avoid adding sound effects for."

Fremer even wound up taping his Saab Sonett's Ford V4 engine with a Stellavox portable reel-to-reel recorder, while he "drove way too fast on Mulholland Drive, down and up-shifting" so that it could be processed into the sound for the film's famous light cycles.

Apart from the mammoth artistic effort it took to get everything written and recorded in time, there were also the technical issues Carlos faced in synchronising the 16-track recordings to a video playback system in her home studio. So as not to be undone by the challenge, she used her HP 9825 computer to write her own music-cue locator program in her "spare" time – which is sort of akin to piloting an Airbus A320 with a slide rule.

"There were also some recording issues in London," recollects Fremer. "She got into an argument with the guy that was supervising the production about where the microphone should be placed on certain instruments. The desire was to leave enough room for her to overdub synthesisers, and she really struggled to fill in the gaps that were left from the trumpets being too far away."

The resulting soundtrack dead-centres the bullseye – combining sweeping and majestic orchestrations with unsettling electronic stabs and flourishes. Listening to tracks like 'A New Tron And The MCP' and 'Water Music And Tronaction' alongside the completed film – directed by Steven Lisberger and starring a pre-"Dude" Jeff Bridges – is a reminder of how potent Carlos was at fashioning beautifully layered arrangements. And the main theme for the film still stands up as one of her most delightful and memorable compositions.

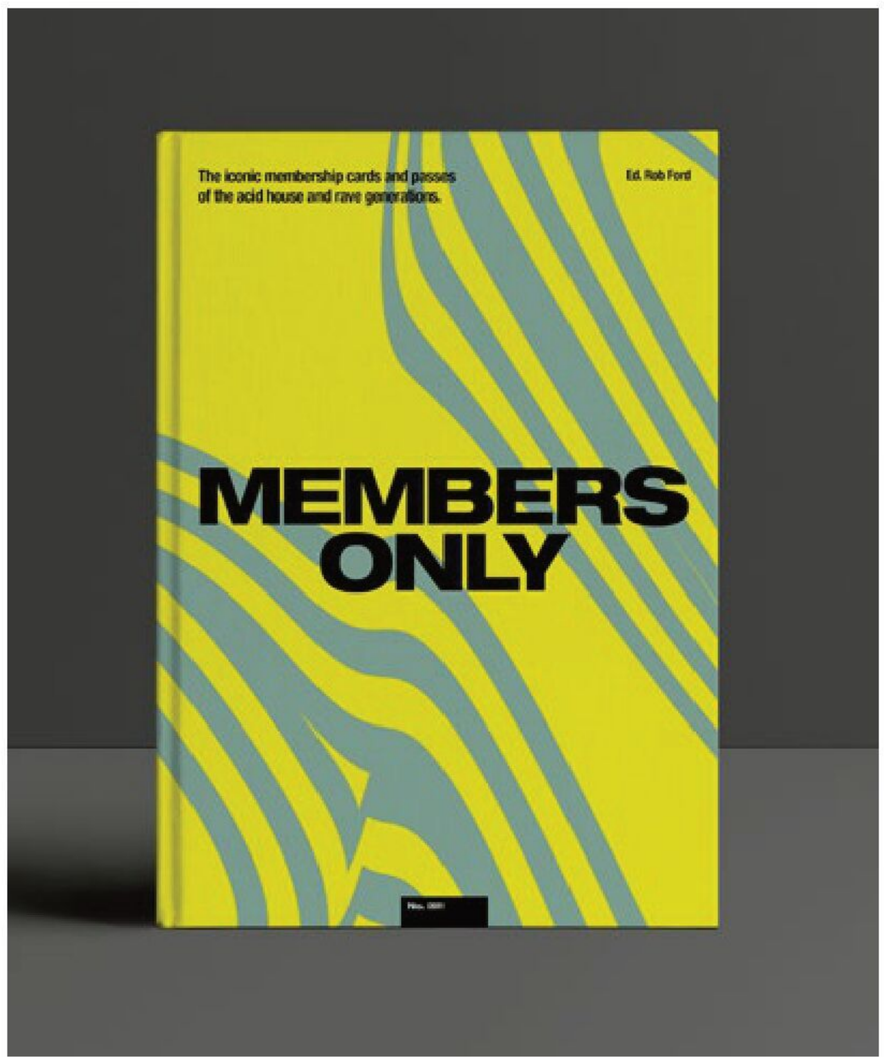
"I loved the main theme that she created, which was very dramatic," says Fremer. "She was totally professional and great to work with despite all the trouble with the movie getting changed every week. Ultimately, it came out really good. Only somebody that smart could have processed all of this and ended up producing the final track on deadline. Only somebody who combined the technical chops to compose, record and produce could have done this as it turned out. A regular composer could not have done it. There's no doubt in my mind."

The 2022 reissue of 'Tron: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack' is out now on Walt Disney

ACCESS ALL AREAS

New book about... well, you had to be there

If you were raving during the halcyon days of acid house, you might have been lucky enough to possess a membership card from one of the storied clubs at the forefront of the scene. Rob Ford's brilliant new book, 'Members Only: The Iconic Membership Cards And Passes Of The Acid House And Rave Generations', is an illustrated guide to these wonderful ephemera, featuring more than 500 items from the clubs and events of the era, including the Haçienda in Manchester, Shoom in south London and Dreamscape in Milton Keynes. Rather jaw-droppingly, the whopping 432-page book is mostly made up of Ford's own collection, which includes one card from 1974, and the 1988 Shoom pin badge that's one of the earliest examples of the yellow smiley face in action. 'Members Only' is available as a deluxe hardback book for £24, with all first editions individually numbered as a throwback to many of the original membership cards. **velocitypress.uk**



INDIE GO GO

Music journo goes in search of C86 kids

Seen as the crystallising moment of indie rock in the UK, NME's 'C86' freebie cassette featured early incarnations of Primal Scream, The Pastels and The Wedding Present, who all went on to international and critical acclaim. But what happened to the lesser-known darlings who never quite made it to pop stardom, like Hebden Bridge's angular weirdniks, Bogshed?

In his new book, 'Whatever Happened To The C86 Kids? An Indie Odyssey', writer Nige Tassell hunts down the former members of the C86 bands to see what happened to them. One character is believed to have become an Olympic sailor – remarkable that Bobby Gillespie kept this achievement under wraps for so long. This is essential reading for anyone who can remember that little cassette, and you can buy a hardback copy now for £20. **instagram.com/nineeightbooks**

LANDMARKS

American musician **Laraaji** recalls the making of 1980's mesmeric new age classic '**Ambient 3: Day Of Radiance**', produced by Brian Eno

INTERVIEW: ROBERT HARRIS

"In 1966, I left Howard University in Washington DC after majoring in piano and moved to Harlem in New York City. I'd been strongly advised to explore my comedy acting potential on the Greenwich Village coffee house hootenanny circuit. The Bitter End and The Champagne Gallery were two of the popular talent night spots.

"By 1968, I had a manager and a booking agent. After that, I toured the Job Corp camps of America doing stand-up in a trio road tour. I also did a few comedy MC engagements at the famous Apollo Theater in Harlem – announcing acts like BB King, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Lou Rawls, Carla Thomas, Barry White... acting was intended to be a strategy for getting financially stable enough to devote my time to serious piano composition.

"After appearing in the 1969 film 'Putney Swope', however, I felt a personal responsibility for the film's impact on the sensibilities of the black community. I questioned my intentions and role in the mass media as an actor, and that's when things like yoga, meditation, mind science and mindfulness began to interest me as vehicles for sharpening my sense of personal identity and purpose in the world.

"Then, while attempting to pawn an acoustic guitar in Queens in 1974, an inner soul-level guide indicated to me that the zither in the window would be a better exchange than asking for money for the guitar. This voice was so clear, so present and so loving that it was my scientific duty to explore where it was taking me. I accepted the guidance and left the pawnshop with this new zither/auto harp instrument – and $5 – and began experimenting, exploring, co-inventing new music.

"The well-known inspirational acting premise of 'what if' was my approach to modifying the zither. Creative curiosity. What if I amplified the zither? What if I played the zither like a string drum? What if I tuned my favourite guitar open tunings onto the zither? What if I performed the zither while in deep meditative contemplation?

"Before I connected with Brian Eno at Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village, I had already recorded one solo zither vinyl LP called

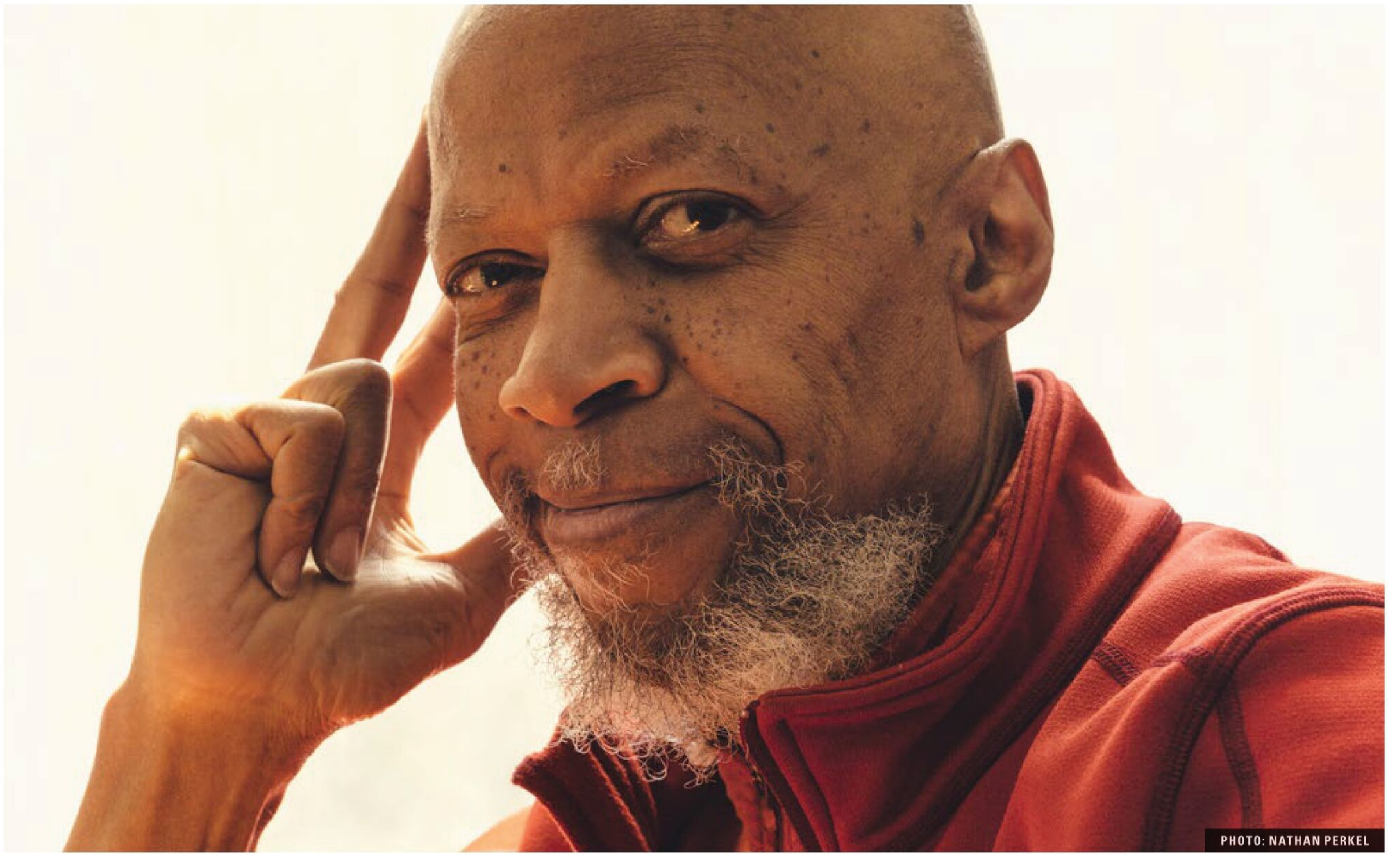


PHOTO: NATHAN PERKEL

'Celestial Vibration' as Edward Larry Gordon, which is still circulating under the name Laraaji. I had also recorded many cassettes, which were distributed through local boutiques and specialist record stores that handled new age, experimental recordings. I'd performed at various New York outdoor street festivals, yoga centres and new age conferences before meeting Brian, and I had an original innovative zither performance style in place by the time he offered to produce 'Day Of Radiance'.

"The north-east corner of Washington Square Park was my favourite place for performing meditative, free-flow, immersive, zither music. On the day that I met Brian, I set up my gear as usual on a mat on the ground with my back against a tree that was situated in this cobblestone circular sitting area. There were benches around it, creating a cosy intimate space. I performed electric zither – plugged into a small Panasonic tape recorder I'd repurposed as an amplifier and maybe I was using an MXR Phase 90 – seated in a cross-legged yogic lotus position, eyes closed, freely improvising while in a deep contemplative trance.

"After about two hours of continuous performance I finished with a bow, unplugged my zither and started counting the donations left in the open case. Among the donations was a page ripped from an expensive notebook. The message was brief, to the effect, 'Dear Sir, please excuse this spontaneous note. I'm interested in talking to you about participating in a recording project. Could you please call me at this phone number', signed Brian Eno. The next day we had a meeting at Brian's loft in the Village to discuss his interest in producing an ambient music album, featuring my innovative zither style.

"My only prior exposure to the name Brian Eno was a month earlier, when a couple of new fans – at the same area of Washington Square Park – approached me after my evening performance and politely enquired if I was familiar with Fripp and Eno. They suggested that I investigate their music and that I might find a resonance there.

"At our first meeting in the Greenwich Village loft, Brian presented his ideas around ambient recording. The concept was clearer to him than to me, but I was totally confident that our studio collaboration would result in something interesting.

"The first studio location was Greene Street in Soho. There, we recorded the first session tracks. After listening back to all of them we felt that the 'Dance' tracks were good but that the 'Meditation' ones had picked up a foreign, low-frequency noise from other areas of the Greene Street building. Six months later, we recorded fresh 'Meditation' tracks in a different, and quieter, New York studio.

"No other artists were involved in these recordings. Rudy Hui, I believe, was the name of the recording engineer. The album is me performing solo, with Brian as producer. Brian prepared the studio with mics and also applied subtle electronic treatments, both during and after the session, using Lexicon and Eventide effects.

"He suggested ways to explore the zither in keeping with the direction of his ambient series project. I won't say that I grasped his first efforts at explaining ambient music, but in the studio Brian produced a comfortable space for me to explore and to experiment. The name, 'Day Of Radiance', came through a conversation with my former wife and friend, Georgina.

"The two recording sessions were each one full day. I seem to recall doing the first session in autumn 1979, the second session in the spring of 1980 and then the release came in autumn of that year through EG Records. Any acclaim, though, was not immediate. It wasn't until 1986 or '87 that I began touring abroad with Opal Evening – a collection of artists who had worked with Brian's label. From then on though, global bookings and engagements flowed more and more.

"I did do a few further low-profile studio projects with Brian, but so far we have not entertained doing another album. Such a project might be a very interesting one. We are still in contact, emailing every now and then. Whenever my touring takes me into London, we consider any convenience to hook up with each other. Our meetings are guaranteed opportunities for laughter."

SIMPLE PLEASURES

Bridging the musical generation gap

Ever had the urge to put your mobile phone on your turntable? Nope, us neither. But Yamaha's new TurnT device presents a digital tonearm that allows users to literally drop the needle on a phone screen and play a virtual record. Useful? The jury's still out on that one, but TurnT forms part of Yamaha's new series called Stepping Out Of The Slate, which sees the Japanese company endeavouring to put the ceremony back into listening to music. A noble cause, indeed.
yamaha.com

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Ornithologically orientated dreampop duo

WHO?

Victoria Suter and Mathieu Daubigné met while learning music theory as teenagers in their native Agen, France. Then Suter moved to Barcelona in 2010 and Daubigné followed suit six years later. Their debut release as O'o, 2018's startling 'Spells', won plaudits for its bewitching vocal experimentation that was at times redolent of Laurie Anderson. 'Touche', their first album proper, is a multifaceted progression, embracing melody and colour and exploring the possibilities of sound manipulation from field recordings as well as the human voice (mostly Suter's). Daubigné operates with a deftness and subtlety that makes 'Touche' such a deluxe listening experience from beginning to end.

WHY O'O?

Suter was drawn to the unusual calligraphic formation of the Kauai Ō'ō's name, while thumbing through an English anthology of weird words and phrases. Her interest piqued, she sought out the Hawaiian songbird's distinctive chirrup. It's a haunting cri de coeur, made all the more eerie in the knowledge that the bird had become extinct more than 30 years ago. That strong sense of melancholy permeates the music, though it's also playful and sensual, sounding otherworldly but always grounded in the existential experience of being.

TELL US MORE...

As a storyteller in the great tradition of the French chanson, Suter has a beady eye for the finer details that bring songs to life, with a wonderful command of both English and French. 'Moon' is an ambient mood board that evokes the languor of sleeplessness. 'Somewhere' explores the mystery of capturing songs from the air like a lepidopterist, and 'Spin' is written from the perspective of a big sister dispensing advice to a younger sibling at the funfair. The carnival ambience is reimagined while Suter's remarkable voice rides over the undulating accompaniment, evoking all the excitement and terror of the waltzers.

JEREMY ALLEN

'Touche' is out now on Infiné

WHEN RADIO FLOWERED LIKE CRAZY

Maddalena Fagandini, the "other female composer" in Caroline Catz's wonderfully offbeat 2020 docudrama, 'Delia Derbyshire: The Myths And The Legendary Tapes', talks about the various antics that occurred in the BBC studios during the very serious process of creating music for radio and TV

WORDS: JO HUTTON

In 1962, 'Time Beat' became the first commercial electronic music release from the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. It was credited to Ray Cathode, the pseudonym of Maddalena Fagandini and George Martin (before his days as The Beatles' producer).

Fagandini joined the Workshop in 1959 and stayed until 1963. While there, she created some of the most iconic jingles, signature tunes and drama sound effects for BBC radio and TV, including Jean Cocteau's production of 'Orphée', 'The Prisoner' and 'Points Of View'. When she left she became a television producer, devoting the remainder of her career to the BBC. The following is an extract from an interview with Fagandini, conducted in 2000…

How did you come to work at the BBC?

"I started work as a dictation typist in the Italian section of the BBC at Bush House. After about three years, they were taking on studio manager trainees, so I applied. You picked up how to use a microphone and work with tape, and I learned pretty fast."

Were there many other women in electronic music back then?

"There was a tradition of using women as engineers and technical people in BBC radio, which began when all the gentlemen went off to fight in the war. A colleague of mine was a control room engineer before becoming a studio manager and then a producer. And there were also others there who worked on transmitters."

What kind of background training did you have for all this?

"The only background knowledge I had was music – I learned to play the piano as a child. I had six weeks at Bush House, including a certain amount of technical stuff and beginning to use tape machines, then six weeks over at Broadcasting House, where I wanted to stay in drama and music. They were beginning to do more contemporary stuff there which required non-conventional sound treatments."

When was this, in the early 1950s?

"It must have started in 1953 or 1954. It was a time when radio really flowered like crazy. Daphne Oram was a music studio manager, Desmond Briscoe was a very good drama studio manager, and they got together and created electronic sound for the first drama of that sort, Samuel Beckett's 'All That Fall'. It was a series of noises, beautifully constructed to fit the drama."

Why was the Radiophonic Workshop so different?

"It provided producers with the possibility of creating far more elaborate sound pictures, consisting of more than just actors, a few effects and a bit of conventional music. When you think of a Beckett work like 'Embers', which was about being inside someone's head… there was no way you could do that with regular orchestral music. Electronic sound gradually opened up all sorts of new vistas."

Was it all musique concrète sounds at the time?

"Yes, it was all recorded natural sounds. We were also given a bank of oscillators, but just one sine wave per oscillator, so you had to really build up any note with its harmonics. To get the mix right for a particular kind of sound was quite tricky. You need a knowledge of shape and construction in both musical and dramatic terms.

"I particularly loved doing spot effects in the studio. You don't wait for the actor and the actor doesn't wait for you, it just happens together. It's far better than on disc because you get the perspective right. I fought with myself in a gravel pit at one point, in front of a microphone going, 'Huh, huh, huh!', supposedly on a beach somewhere!"

Were you told what sound effects were needed or did you always create your own?

"Well, you could see from the script, and then it was up to you. Raymond Raikes did a Restoration play in which there were many different doors. There were two or three doors on a box on wheels which you could move around if it needed to be nearer to the microphone. By the last one, I had run out of creaks. Raikes said, 'Try running a pencil along the perforated panels on the wall'. You know the sound baffling you get? He said, 'That'll do'.

"Another play needed footsteps in the snow, and I wasn't getting it right so the actor Norman Shelley said, 'Get a large roll of cotton wool and just squeeze it close to the microphone'. And it worked!"

What do you think was so special about musique concrète?

"With musique concrète, you can use anything. Literally. You can break glass, record the wind outside in the street, the cars going by, reverse them, play with them… I realised that I had to choose as little as possible and see what came out of those few sounds by changing the speed and filtering. We over-stretched the machinery and got it to make noises you wouldn't want in normal broadcasting! We made the old valves whistle and screech, we played around with loops, moans, groans and whispers.

"When Orson Welles came to London to do 'Rhinoceros' at the Royal Court, he wanted to know about our effects. We were told he was very impressed."

Tell us about the sounds you created for the radio version of Jean Cocteau's 'Orphée'…

"I chose a Greek scale – four notes, three intervals, a tone and two semitones. I confined myself to those basic notes and recorded the Steinway concert grand from Maida Vale Studio One. I plucked the strings with the pedal down and just let it die. You got the harmonics coming from all directions because the other strings vibrate. You can play with that ad infinitum.

"The shimmering sounds that come whenever The Princess Of Death appears were piano strings. We recorded some wind on tape, Jenyth Worsley held a note as steady and pure as she could, then we played with feedback and the tape going backwards and forwards, and it just started to float.

"Going through the mirror was a sound played backwards – glass breaking plus some piano strings from an old upright that was in our little studio. I just crashed against it so it was very jangly and then brought it to a sudden halt."

Did you work with Delia Derbyshire?

"Yes, briefly. She arrived after me. She was very organised and a lot more musically trained than I was. She used the oscillators in a more structured way, and she knew the harmonic construction of certain sounds, so she could put them together. She worked with the composer Ron Grainer on 'Doctor Who'."

Didn't you work with Ron Grainer on the film of 'The Caretaker'?

"Yes, well that was a secret, I wasn't supposed to… we had to work in the evenings. The producer, Michael Birkett, wanted this different music. I mean, you couldn't put ordinary music on there. I think they were a bit worried about Pinter's reaction, but he was fascinated by our sounds.

"I'd play around with what I knew about music, to construct something that made musical sense to people listening, but I realised that the sounds themselves were suggesting what to do.

"You learn that what you need is already there for you to find. It has its own rhythm – you have to just let it happen."

A remastered digital version of Ray Cathode's 'Time Beat' is out now on Dublab

HEALING FORCE PROJECT

Heavyweight cosmic wizardry from Treviso

WHO?

Italian composer Antonio Marini has been forging new routes into the outer cosmos for over a decade under his Healing Force Project moniker. Using American free-jazz figurehead Albert Ayler's 1970 album 'Music Is The Healing Force Of The Universe' as an inspirational foundation, Marini believes that via study, experimentation and the breaking down of traditional patterns, a spiritual remedy begins to radiate through sound. And on the evidence set out on his new LP, 'Drifted Entities (Vol 1)', he's clearly onto something.

WHY HEALING FORCE PROJECT?

Because the idea of Sun Ra, King Tubby, George Clinton and Adrian Sherwood's On-U Sound forming an explosive sound bomb at the outer limits of the known musical universe is something worth shouting about. There's a fierce, genuinely avant-garde bravery at the heart of this compelling, often awe-inspiring sound that lures us in with many familiar tropes – pioneering kosmische, echo-chamber dub, free-jazz and deep-funk, to name just a few. It's scintillating stuff.

TELL US MORE...

Although these influences are apparent throughout Marini's new album, at choice moments, and especially when the bass-led momentum appears to be leading us towards dancefloor, we're pulled into nebulous, convention-defying sound worlds that pay scant regard to structure and form. And on remarkable tracks like 'Double Orbit', the very heaviest in searching, amorphous sonic experiences ensue, shifting paradigms before your very ears. You are eventually brought back to Earth's chaos with an excoriating dose of anarchic hardcore junglism in a moment you really don't see coming. He's something else, this maverick anti-popster, but a word of caution for any equestrian types – he is liable to frighten your horses.

CARL GRIFFIN

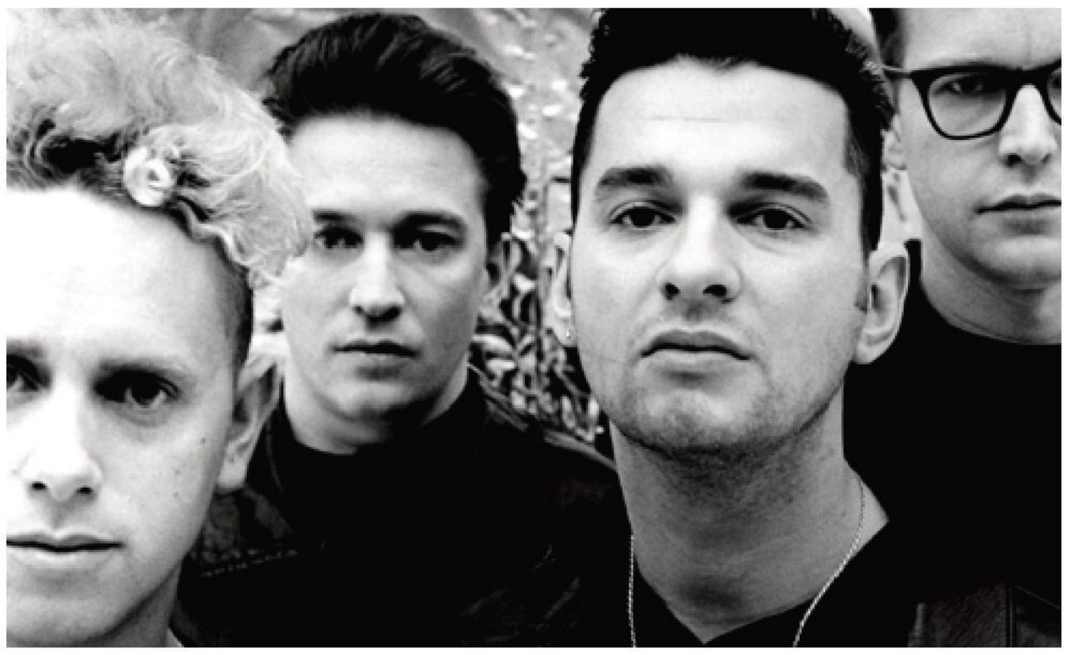
'Drifted Entities (Vol 1)' is out now on Beat Machine

DEPECHE MADE

Classic album gets a dedicated history

Released in March 1990, the 'Violator' album marked a turning point for Depeche Mode. Not only did they freshen up the recording approach for their seventh studio long-player, but the huge reaction (it sold seven-and-a-half million copies) catapulted the band into the spotlight, and the boys from Basildon would never be the same again.

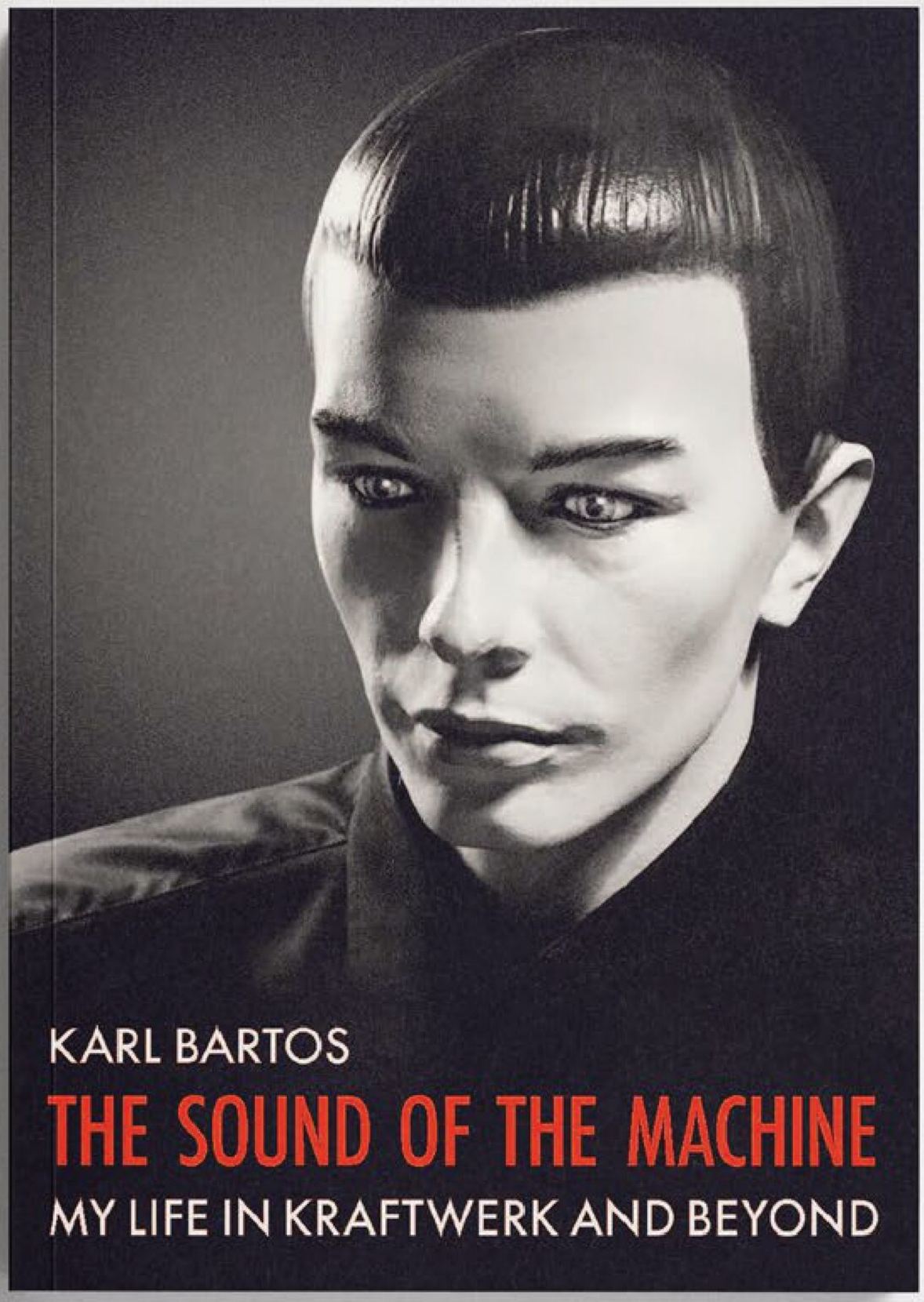
Published this month by Grosvenor House, 'Halo' charts the making of this seminal moment in electronic music history. Written by self-confessed "uber-fans" Kevin May and David McElroy (and edited by our very own Mat Smith), the book goes behind the scenes as the pair interview many key figures who saw the true story – studio hands, tour managers, publicists and more. 'Halo' is published at the end of the month and you can pre-order a copy now for £19.99. **halotheviolatorbook.com**



KIDS THESE DAYS

Documenting 10 decades of teenage life in Blighty

Get yourselves down to Coventry for 'Grown Up In Britain: 100 Years Of Teenage Kicks', a major exhibition about British youth culture from pre-Second World War to today. Presenting photographs, films and ephemera, expect to see some of the most immaculately postered bedrooms ever, extraordinary volumes of hair product and a thorough investigation into what it means to grow up in the British Isles. Those attending the free exhibition can scan their own photos and paraphernalia, which will then be added to the collections. The exhibition runs until February 2023. **theherbert.org**



“For a long time there was only one Kraftwerk narrative. I think it’s time to open up a second perspective. After all, three composers and one poet were involved in our music, not one ex-member of the classic line-up and some engineers. I wanted to look at everything again, analyse it and draw the right conclusions. The fairy tale told over and over about our music, our time together and the different roles was in dire need of an addition or two from me.”

(Karl Bartos talking to Electronic Sound in July 2022)

Available now at
electronicsound.co.uk/shop

THE POWER IN YOUR PALM

Second coming of the Orba

Artiphon have unveiled the follow-up to their compact circular instrument and MPE controller, the Orba. A remarkably powerful little device, the Orba 2 features onboard synth and traditional instrument sounds, as well as a capable sampler that can either record or import audio to map a sound across different pitches. Played with the keys on its circular interface, the Orba 2 responds to a variety of gestures, including bumping, shaking and tilting, too. Since it can be used to control MIDI-compatible software like Ableton Live, Logic Pro and Pro Tools, it can hold its own in a professional music environment as well as facilitate hours of fun. Yours for $149.99.

artiphon.com

VERYAN.BANDCAMP.COM

PULSE

TAN COLOGNE

Dreampop duo widen horizons

WHO?

Made up of Lauren Green and Marissa Macias, Tan Cologne are a duo from New Mexico, offering a type of gothic dreampop that registers somewhere in the intersection between the ambient drift pop of Julia Holter, Galaxie 500's wistful slowcore and the bittersweet hooks of Mazzy Star. After their debut, 'Cave Vaults On The Moon In New Mexico', their follow-up, 'Earth Visions Of Water Spaces', expands that evocative aesthetic into wide, technicolour vistas draped in ethereal guitar and kissed by their pristine voices.

WHY TAN COLOGNE?

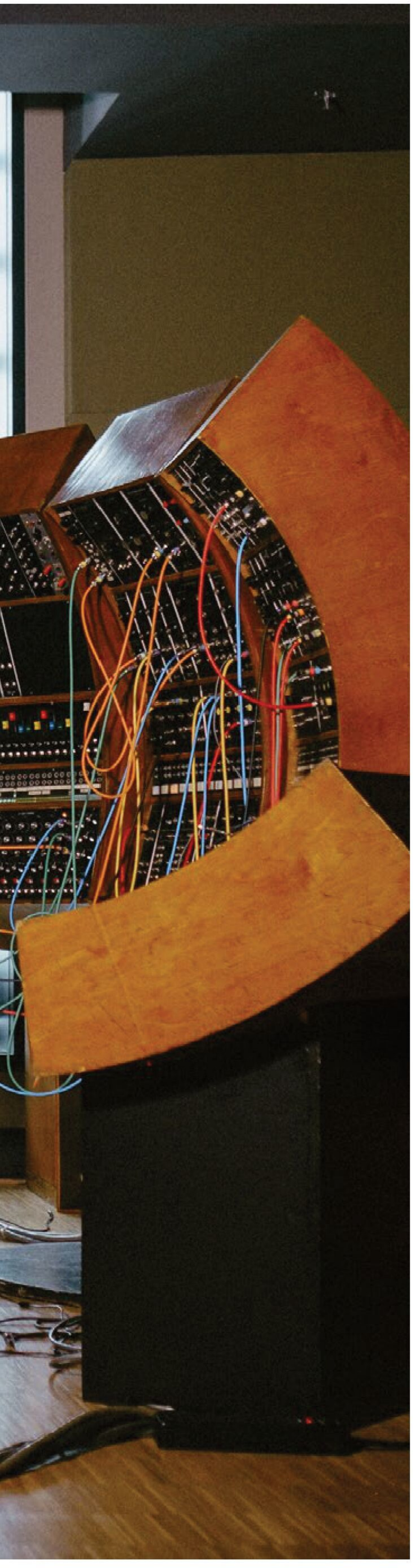
It's these vocals that radiate Tan Cologne's emotive heart. Moving between the hazy echo of tracks such as 'Strange God' and the spectral melancholy of 'New Dune', their first record shares understandable common ground with the likes of Cocteau Twins and Broadcast. On their follow-up, however, these delicate drifts have hardened into a low-key shoegaze masterpiece. 'Floating Gardens' wraps chiming guitars around haunting vocals, while 'Heretic Porcelain' wouldn't sound out of place on Slowdive's 'Souvlaki'.

TELL US MORE...

The duo's vivid artistic vision is not restricted to music and pervades their other creative interests. Besides various solo visual projects, the pair also collaborate on Psychic Sink, a platform for multidisciplinary artists to perform and release their work. What's most striking, however, is the sense of landscape that exudes from their work. Pescetrullo is an Italian architectural project set among olive groves, where Tan Cologne completed an artistic residency that saw their lush reverberations and subtly underlying weirdness provide a perfect match for the oddly coloured structures nestling in the reds and browns of the Ostuni countryside.

SPENSER TOMSON

'Earth Visions Of Water Spaces' is out now on Labrador



HIVE MIND

Canadian producer Rich Aucoin has set himself the task of making an album featuring the most number of synths ever

WORDS: WILLIAM STOKES

Rich Aucoin wants you to be on his next album.

"If anyone reading wants to be a part of the record, if they can send me something by November then they could be," the Canadian artist interjects as we're about to wrap up our call.

The album in question is 'Synthetic – A Synth Odyssey: Season 2', a quadruple release promising more synthesisers than any other in recorded history. And that, as you can probably imagine, requires a team effort.

'Season 1' already has a ribbon around it, and is slated for release on 21 October via We Are Busy Bodies. It forges through nine maximalist electronic instrumentals, from the angular industrial beats of 'Buchla' to the climactic, video game-redolent 'Space Western'. If nothing else, the record demonstrates that Aucoin's master plan for this project (and beyond) is already well underway.

"I need to have 'Season 2' ready by the end of October, to press vinyl," he says matter-of-factly, from his base in Halifax, Nova Scotia. "We're going to finish part two in October, and I'm hoping to do parts three and four in December because in January I want to bike across New Zealand and start the next record, which is going to be all about my love of DJ Shadow."

Aucoin's school of creativity is that of Wayne Coyne, Peter Gabriel and Frank Zappa – one that takes an untenably big idea and asks, "But what if we actually did that?". It's not often that an artist with such ambition actually has material proof to back it up, and even rarer for that artist to do so without bottomless, crazy-genius-justified major label budgets.

"As I start going down the road of an idea, I realise that, not wanting to repeat myself, I'm thinking, 'Oh, I'm probably never going to do this again', so I want to go as hard as I can in that direction," explains Aucoin.

Just take his debut album 'We're All Dying To Live' as an example.

"The idea was to record with as many people as I could," says Aucoin. "That ballooned into me recording with over 550 people. It had everyone from my roommates to members of Arcade Fire on it. All Canadian musicians.

"I like going all in. I'm hoping at the end of my career, I'll have different phases and different things for each bit of music that I've been interested in making, and not seem like I repeated myself at all."

It's this cocktail of musical ambition and communal spirit (not to mention an unbridled penchant for genre-hopping) that led to 'Synthetic'.

"I decided to do a similar thing with this record," says Aucoin. "I was going to make a synth piece, and invite people into it. It started with me doing an artist residency programme in Calgary, Alberta. We've got this National Music Centre out there. It homes some of the most unique synthesisers in the world, including the famous Tonto synthesiser from [Brian De Palma's 1974 rock horror musical comedy] 'Phantom Of The Paradise'."

For those who don't know, the Tonto is one of the world's largest synths – a 360-degree modular beast with top rows curving in overhead like the imagined controls of a retrofuturist flying saucer – and its sound opens 'Synthetic – A Synth Odyssey: Season 1'.

"I didn't have any notes or anything before I started jamming on that instrument," says Aucoin. "I took about five hours worth of recorded material, cut it down and arranged it."

He also visited Los Angeles' well-known Vintage Synth Museum to collect sounds for the album.

"You rent the studio, and the guy there, Lance, is just like, 'What's up. I'll be in the back room if you need anything'. And you're just there with all these old pieces of gear! It felt like college again, when I was just dialling everything in and getting lost and then being like, 'Oh, I gotta get back to recording something!'

"I don't have a crazy amount of gear," Aucoin continues, gesturing to a lonely Moog Subsequent 37 on the desk beside him. "This is my only nice synth! I probably will make more synth music in the future, but never focused like this. It became this thing where I thought I might as well go for the 'Guinness Book Of World Records'.

"This first part – 'Season 1' – I kind of treated like my first EP again, playing all the synths myself. I'm hoping to have about 100 collaborators on each album. I'm going to invite people to come play for 30-second or one-minute chunks, here and there."

Which takes us back to Aucoin's opening appeal. If you'd like to be a part of 'Synthetic – A Synth Odyssey: Season 2', contact him via richaucoin.ca. He's deadly serious, too. He's already enlisted yours truly.

'Synthetic – A Synth Odyssey: Season 1' is out on 21 October on We Are Busy Bodies.
'Season 2' release date TBC

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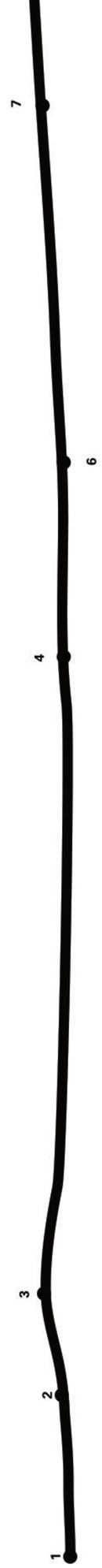
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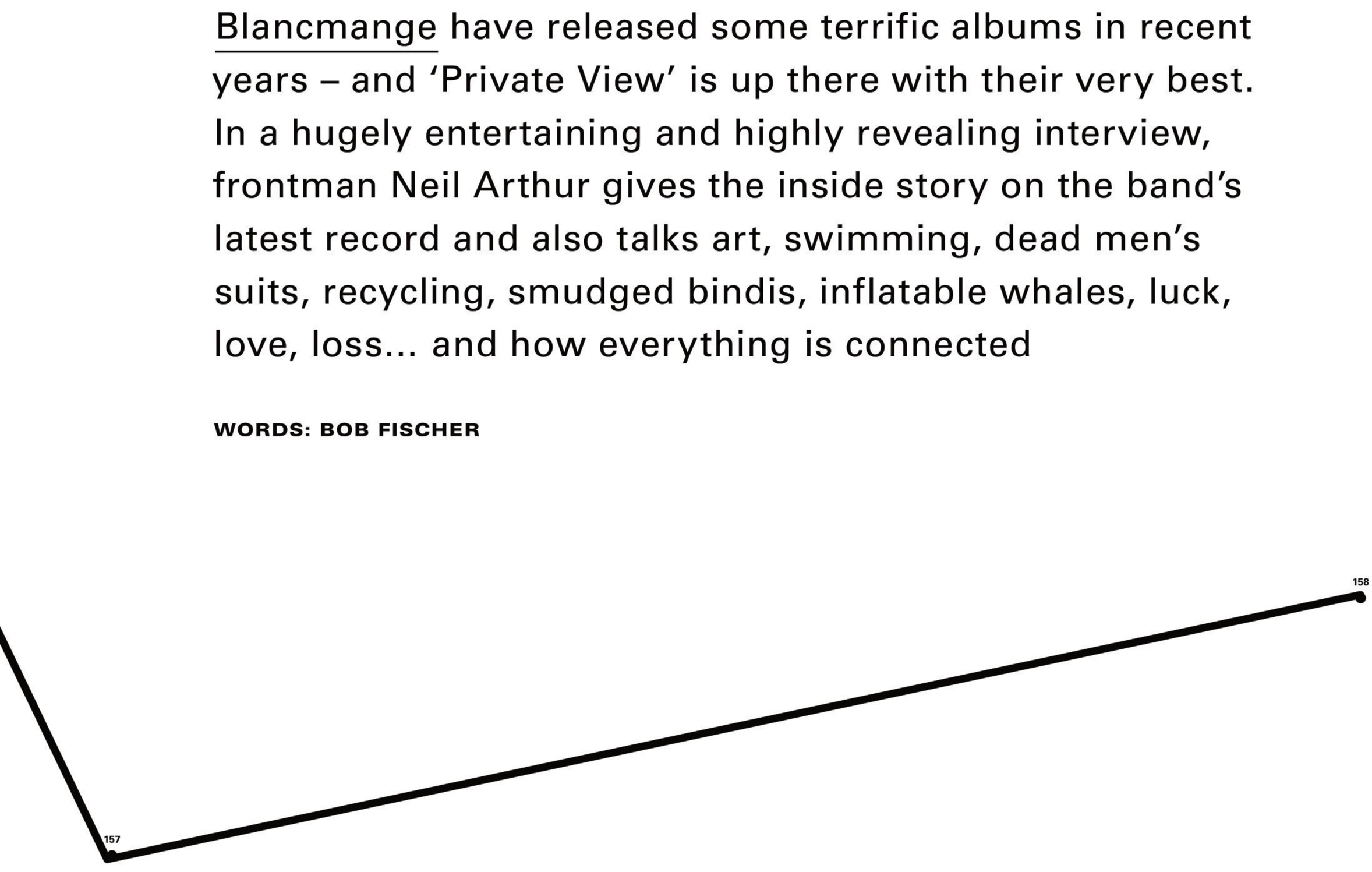
JOINING ALL THE DOTS

Blancmange have released some terrific albums in recent years – and ‘Private View’ is up there with their very best. In a hugely entertaining and highly revealing interview, frontman Neil Arthur gives the inside story on the band’s latest record and also talks art, swimming, dead men’s suits, recycling, smudged bindis, inflatable whales, luck, love, loss... and how everything is connected

WORDS: BOB FISCHER



"I've told you all my stories already," laughs Neil Arthur.

He's got a point, but he's being way too modest. It's a sticky afternoon on London's South Bank and we're sitting outside a cafe round the back of the Royal Festival Hall. He's had a shrimp burger and I've had something that sounded slightly posher on the menu but was essentially a cheese toastie.

By the time we go "on the record", we have been chatting for well over an hour – about everything from the antics of his 16-year-old dog Audrey to Blancmange's early 1980s tours with Depeche Mode and the chess-playing prowess of the late Andy Fletcher. Neil Arthur is a one-man anecdote machine. He is fantastic company. But *all* his stories? We've barely scratched the surface.

And here's the thing. These tales of derring-do on the high seas of synthpop may seem unrelated at first, bouncing merrily between the past and the present, between the personal and the professional, but if you listen closely, you realise that Neil Arthur weaves subtle conversational threads through them all. He's a veritable master at joining the dots. To quote the title of a key track on 'Private View', the new Blancmange album, 'Everything Is Connected'.

There's lots of noisy drilling going on outside the Southbank Centre, so we move inside. It doesn't disrupt Neil's flow, though.

We are talking about two Blancmange live performances in London, four decades apart. Three months ago, the present-day version of Blancmange played at the 2022 Meltdown Festival, an event curated by Grace Jones here at the Southbank. Although on that occasion, they probably asked the workmen to keep it down a bit.

"To be asked to perform by Grace Jones and to play on the same bill as John Grant… that was just incredible," beams Neil. "We did a relatively short set on a very hot day. Liam Hutton was soundchecking onstage and he had a pair of shorts on. Finlay Shakespeare was also wearing shorts. I assumed they were going to get changed afterwards, but you couldn't go into our dressing room because the temperature was in the 50s! We always do a little pre-show ritual before we go onstage… and I just looked at them both. I had my suit on and those two were dressed like they were going down the beach.

"But 41 years ago, Blancmange played with Grace Jones at Drury Lane. It was bonkers. At the time, I had a job as a graphic designer, just down the road from here. The phone rang and my boss picked it up and said, 'It's for you – make it your last call of the day'. I thought it was a mate having a laugh. Some bloke was saying, 'Grace Jones wants you to support her next week'. Honestly, I said, 'Fuck off', and put the phone down. But then it rang again. 'You! Never swear at me on the phone again! *Do* you want to support Grace Jones?'

"The boss never let me have time off, so I went straight from work to the gig. Stephen Luscombe [Neil's original partner in Blancmange] was in graphics as well and we had to finish that day's jobs before we left. So my girlfriend Helen, dressed to the nines in high heels and this beautiful 1950s outfit, borrowed her mum's Mini Clubman and went round to our respective places to pick up our gear. She was thinking she'd knock on the stage door and someone would say, 'I'll take the gear in', but they just ignored her and she had to carry everything in herself.

"Anyway, we set up a bit like Morecambe and Wise in front of the curtains. We ambled on and Stephen started the cassette player with the backing track. I was still playing guitar at this stage – 'I Can't Explain' and all that stuff. We came off with a few people giving slow handclaps, but then we watched Grace Jones and our worlds changed. It was the best live performance I'd ever seen. She was climbing up the PA, changing costumes, balancing on a bar between the audience and the orchestra pit, wearing heels and this stunning blue suit…

"As we were watching, Stephen and I said, 'Right, let's learn a lesson from this. Tomorrow, we put suits on'. And we basically went to Oxfam and got dead men's suits. After that, we felt we had this slight protection somehow, a sort of barrier, and in a way that allowed us to give a bit more. I'm sure we still sounded pretty ropey, but it was a big moment for us.

"After the show, we all ended up in the dressing room sitting on Grace Jones' knee. She said, 'Come here!', and I sat on her knee for a while… then Helen had a go… and then Stephen had a go! Then she said she wanted to go clubbing, so we went to a place called Cha-Chas and did some gyrating. Bloody amazing."

We're both chortling away now, to the bemusement of the afternoon bar staff. But hang on a minute, we need to rewind a little. What's the Blancmange pre-show ritual?

"Ah, that's a big secret," he says, wagging a warning finger. "We've done it forever."

Are there props involved?

"No props."

A chant?

"There is a certain noise."

A bodily function?

"Nothing voluntary."

The bittersweet story of Blancmange is like the plot of some great, unmade Richard Curtis synthpop movie about how Neil Arthur and Stephen Luscombe went from manipulating recordings of 1970s kitchen utensils to celebrating a string of 1980s chart smashes. How the band split as the hits waned and a fame-weary Neil retreated into film soundtracks before the duo reformed to make 'Blanc Burn', their highly acclaimed 2011 album. How Stephen, faced with spiralling health issues, was unable to join the subsequent tour but gave his blessing for it to continue without him. How the friendship between the two

has survived – flourished, even – as new Blancmange albums have appeared at a relentless rate, with producer Ben "Benge" Edwards as Neil's new collaborator-in-chief.

Neil talks about Stephen a lot. And his partner Helen, too. Yes, they're still a couple. Richard Curtis is on his second side of A4 as we speak.

"Helen and I have had our ups and downs, but we've been together for over 40 years now," says Neil with a smile. "Oh God, don't mention that! Just say we've been together a long time! She's put up with some stuff, I tell you."

Elements of these experiences are woven throughout the new Blancmange album, 'Private View'. And Neil's lyrics, often intriguingly obfuscated in the past, are becoming decidedly less cryptic.

"I've always tended to leave a little ambiguity in there, but it is getting less disguised," he concedes. "Still, I don't really want the album to come across as being about me. Some songs are, and you can't help that, but some are about other people's experiences. There's been plenty of ammunition over the last few years, hasn't there?"

That's true, but what's great about Blancmange's songs is they never feel like they're self-consciously about big things. Even when they are, there's a kitchen-sink approach. Take these lines from 'Everything Is Connected': "Hang the washing out / Do the washing up / Close the door and then lock it."

"Yeah, it's the bits in between," agrees Neil. "The cracks. Sinks that need fitting and washers that need changing. I'm really into that."

These same lyrics also sometimes take unexpectedly dark turns. The Lake District village of Coniston is mentioned towards the end of 'Everything Is Connected', for example, described as being "across two tabloid pages". I ask if this is a reference to Donald Campbell, who was killed while attempting to break the water speed record on Coniston Water in 1967.

"The ideas in that song are trying to paint a picture and, yes, that line is about Donald Campbell," says Neil. "I remember the headline from the Daily Mirror – 'She's Tramping, I'm Tripping, I'm Going'. He was narrating the end of *himself*. As a young kid, I thought, 'Oh my goodness, this man has just told us he is about to die'. It was a shock to me, a significant moment for me, and I'll never forget it.

"I'm always interested in what's next, in what's ahead of us. Here we are, moving along. We put the washing out, we bring the washing in. But I noticed that those 'bits in between' can apply to the past too. I'm 64, and lots of things have happened in my life, so I started thinking about how some of them were linked.

"I do it on the song 'Private View' too. I was thinking about the difficulties everyone is going through and about the people who aren't here anymore. For example, when my father died, I was there. And as much as I loved my dad, I hated seeing him suffer. So I had this mantra, 'You can let go…'."

That's very touching, I tell him. My own father is seriously ill and it's an awful thing for a family to have to experience. You desperately don't want to lose them, but seeing them cling on is heartbreaking.

"It is, but there won't be one family that hasn't been through what we've been through."

He smiles reassuringly, then takes a deep breath as he hunts for the lyrics to the song on his phone.

"It's easier for me to sing it," he says. "They're really simple words: 'What could have been / What might have made you better / What might not have been / Let go, let go…'."

For a few moments, he's too overwhelmed to continue. He puts his hand over his face as the tears begin to flow.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Obviously, it's upsetting. This was years ago and I've lost my mum since then. But I'm not feeling sorry for myself. It's what happens with life. Two things are certain – you come and you go. But then I move on in the song and I say, 'You should grab hold of everything!'. You know, do you need to carry your shitty baggage around with you?"

He continues with the lyrics, but it's clearly tough for him.

"'Happy showers come and go / Migrating birds have my view / Have a pleasant trip…' I'm sorry about this. It's very embarrassing. Grief never leaves you, but what you have is the opportunity to learn to live without somebody. You won't get over it, but you do have to carry on with everything. The song is called 'Private View' because it's personal. I wanted it to be out there as an emotional thing, although I've disguised my lyrics a little bit. It's not straight down the line. But somebody might pick up on it and go, 'Shit, yeah…'."

We're both trying to compose ourselves now.

"I feel like a complete wally," he says, shaking his head. "You need to get this stuff out of your system, but what you don't want to do is burden everyone else with it."

I ask Neil about his dad in happier times. What was his job?

"He worked as a foreman in a textiles factory," he replies. "And my mum was originally a seamstress, but then she worked for a company called Walpamur, which became Crown Paints. She used to say she worked on the VD machines. I mean, what was going on in that paint factory? She meant VDU!"

And we're laughing again. That's another thing I love about Blancmange. Like our conversation today, the band's songs are infused with a gritty sense of very northern humour. The ribald wisecracks of the factory floor, told with the earthy resilience of a man who has seen his fair share of dogshit in rusty Lancashire bus shelters, despite it being 45 years since the teenage Neil Arthur left his home town of Darwen for the moderately bright lights of late 1970s London.

"Yeah, it comes out, doesn't it?" he smiles. "It's ridiculous."

Let's get back to talking about music. Let's talk specifically about guitarist David Rhodes. Forty years after he added subtle guitar lines to Blancmange's 1982 debut album, 'Happy Families', he has brought equally tasteful textures to 'Private View'.

"He's a wonderful friend," grins Neil. "I know he's busy, so it was great that he was able to play on this album. He's superb. And he doesn't overdo it. That's one thing I'm still learning – finding the confidence within yourself to think, 'That's enough'.

"Again, it's about those bits in between. I learned this from working on film soundtracks. You don't have music all the time in a film. And when it does come in, it serves a purpose. There are spaces when you're writing songs too. When I'm working on the lyrics of a song, I usually start with a lot of words. But then I think, 'You don't need this… you don't need that…', and I end up whittling them down. I do the same with the music, often with the help of Benge."

Oh yes, Benge – the de facto "other half" of the 21st century Blancmange and also Neil's musical partner in Fader, the pair's experimental side project. Given that these two outfits have identical line-ups, I am curious to find out how the respective Blancmange and Fader approaches differ. Quite profoundly, it would seem. His explanation offers further insight into the Neil Arthur school of lyric writing.

"With Fader, Benge will get together a load of instrumentals and send them across to me," he says. "I'll have a think, then I'll start writing lyrics. Every so often, I'll chop and change the arrangements as well, then I'll send the tracks back with vocals on them. And that's effectively Fader."

He hesitates for a moment and then expands on this.

"The last Fader album we did was actually slightly different. Instead of Benge sending me something called, say, 'Moog 105', he sent me 10 pieces named after paint samples, because he was redecorating his house at the time. I used those as cues. There was one called 'Porcelain', so I thought, 'OK, "Porcelain", how about "Black Porcelain"?'. That made me think of a Black Maria, which in turn made me think about the miners' strike and all kinds of other stuff from the 70s and 80s.

"Another piece that Benge sent me was called 'Serpentine', from which I wrote a song about me and Stephen. It sparked a memory of going to see Stephen and him taking me to Hyde Park. This was after he'd started struggling with his health. It was a beautiful day and we went swimming in the Serpentine. Nobody else was around and we just swam up and down. It felt brilliant.

"When we're working as Blancmange, I start all the songs. Not that Benge doesn't get involved with that, but I will usually have the song structures and the lyrics in place before I give anything to him. So Fader and Blancmange have fundamentally different starting points, even though it's the same two people."

Restlessly prolific since that 2011 comeback, the pandemic years pushed Neil into overdrive. He tries to count the albums by Blancmange and Fader on his fingers, starting from early 2020.

"'Mindset', then 'Expanded Mindset', then 'Nil By Mouth III', then 'Commercial Break', then 'Nil By Mouth IV/V', then the Fader album 'Quartz', and now 'Private View'."

It's a hell of a run. Does he work office hours? He shrugs.

"I don't go into the studio unless I've got something," he says. "But this is a job and I do have to work. It's not, 'Ooooh, I think I might make another album'. There's no great big fucking mansion I can just sit in. That never happened. I want to work, I *have* to work, and I'll never retire."

He pauses again and flashes a playful smile.

"I might decompose."

Blancmange made their vinyl debut with the six-track 'Irene & Mavis' EP in April 1980. It was the one and only release on Blaah Music. The following year, they featured alongside Depeche Mode and Soft Cell on the legendary 'Some Bizarre Album', as a result of which they were snapped up by London Records. They issued three albums on London between 1982 and 1985 – 'Happy Families', 'Mange Tout' and 'Believe You Me' – and clocked up seven Top 40 singles in the process.

Amazingly, four decades on from 'Happy Families', 'Private View' finds Blancmange back on London. This is joining the dots on a truly grand scale.

"I've had to pinch myself!" laughs Neil. "I'd written the new album and sent it to Benge. At which point, my manager said, 'What about letting other people hear this?'. So London had a listen to the demos and immediately said they were interested. To me, it made sense. And they are lovely people. With their backing, I'm hoping that gives us a better opportunity for the album to be heard and to be relevant."

Back in the early 1980s, was it London that helped transform the experimental Blancmange into a bona fide pop machine?

"Yeah," he smiles. "Once we'd signed, it was pretty slick and pretty sharp. But our meanderings before that were exciting too. Working with Stevo from Some Bizarre was great. And our friend Dave Hill using his tax rebate to help us make the 'Irene & Mavis' EP. We were young and we really enjoyed the journey.

"I can remember hearing 'God's Kitchen' on the radio for the first time. We were driving down the M4 and it came on Peter Powell's '5 45s At 5.45' slot. We were on our way to the Brunel Rooms in Swindon to play in front of 50 people. When it came on, we went across three lanes of the motorway!

"And after that, of course, 'Living On The Ceiling' happened. BANG! We got the call to do 'Top Of The Pops' for that and we had to be there really early. I was so excited. I had a beer in the car on the way and I was thinking, 'What am I doing? This is madness'. It was only half past eight in the morning, but for me it felt like it was seven in the evening and I was ready for a pint.

"Once we were in the studio, they did run-throughs for all the camera angles and I kept hearing somebody in the shadows singing along – 'You keep me running round and round / Well that's alright with me'. It was putting me off a bit. I thought, 'Who the bloody hell's that?'. Then the lights went up… and it was George Michael. He knew the lyrics better than I did."

A couple of weeks before my meeting with Neil, he tweeted a picture of himself wearing the Indian-style linen tunic he'd first sported in 1984 in the video for 'The Day Before You Came',

an Abba cover flavoured with the santoor and tabla of regular Blancmange collaborators Deepak Khazanchi and Pandit Dinesh. So was this similar to the "dead men's suits" they had bought after seeing Grace Jones? Did the tunic help to make a slightly overawed 1980s pop star feel more at home with the trappings of celebrity?

"It did. Stephen actually got into wearing a sari onstage and Dinesh put a bindi on our foreheads. Talking about that makes me think of the time we played this incredible theatre in Paris. We were in the dressing room and someone said, 'OK, we're going on', so we did the secret ritual, then they left me alone to gargle because I'd been ill. 'I Can't Explain' started and that was my cue. I had to get onstage for the 14th bar. But I suddenly realised I didn't know where the stage was! It was literally 'Synth Tap'. I had to shout for help from the tour manager and I heard him yelling, 'Arthur! Where the hell are you?'. I yelled back, 'I can't find the stage and I can't find you'.

"When I eventually ran onstage, I'd missed my cue. David Rhodes and Pandit Dinesh were in hysterics, while Stephen was standing with his back to me in his sari. I thought, 'Oh God, he is really pissed off with me'. Anyway, we got through the whole set, came offstage, and I said, 'What's the matter with Stephen?'. Apparently, when everybody went on, all the lights were down and there was dry ice everywhere. He'd walked across the stage, tripped over his monitor, and knocked both his keyboards off their stands. His sari was only half-on and his bindi was smudged."

See what I mean about Neil's stories? He's like the Peter Ustinov of electronic music. I'm guessing he must have made loads of friends in the business. We've already established that Depeche Mode's Andy Fletcher was the undisputed chess champion of early 80s pop.

"Ah, but we beat Depeche Mode at swimming!" grins Neil. "That was in Guernsey. Bloody fantastic. I used to do a lot of swimming and Stephen was keen too, so we challenged them to a competition and we whupped their arses. There was only two of us, but we still beat 'em! We were good pals with Vince Clarke in particular. In terms of other musician friends, well, I knew a lot of people, but I also had the same group of mates from up north and other mates from college down here. And there was Helen, obviously."

'The Day Before You Came' secured Blancmange another 'Top Of The Pops' slot. As one of the most popular synthpop outfits of the early 1980s, they were regulars on the Thursday night TV show. In fact, this was their ninth appearance in a little over 18 months. It was also their last.

"I'd go down to the shops and I'd walk around with people following me. I'd have people coming up to me on the street and in the pub. Some would say really nice things and others would say, 'Are you looking at my girlfriend? I reckon you are'.

"When we stopped doing it, in some ways I was happy to be out of it. But there's no therapy for the comedown. You don't get any help. You make music for a while and, if you're successful, there's a tag that comes with it – you're a 'pop star'. But once that stops, what do you do? I was lucky because I had a friend who had just started directing and he offered me some film music work. But between jobs… well, there aren't very many musicians who can't decorate."

Including Neil Arthur?

"Yep! Of course! I did it for friends and for friends' mums. But you've just got to get on with it, haven't you? I did find things quite difficult, though. Sometimes you'd still get recognised in a pub and you'd really rather that didn't happen. I'd be going round the shops with Helen, picking up beans and toilet rolls, and someone would come up and say, 'Where's Stephen?'. I'd say, 'It's not the fucking Beatles, it's only Blancmange…'."

The conversation has drifted back round to Helen. She's clearly his rock.

"There's a pun in the title 'Private View'," he reveals. "Helen is a painter and we've got quite a lot of friends who are artists. When we lived in south London, one of my regular walks was to get off the train at Charing Cross and go across Trafalgar Square to the National Gallery. I realised you could actually walk straight through the gallery to the street at the other side. You could stop and have your lunch in there. When Helen was away in Barcelona – she was doing an MA in Fine Art over there – I'd often go and sit in front of our favourite painting, 'Doge Leonardo Loredan' by Giovanni Bellini. It's an absolutely beautiful work.

"This was in the early 1990s, around the time I was getting some songs together for a project called Delirious. Neil Arthur is Delirious! David Rhodes was involved. So was Mark Nevin from Fairground Attraction. So was Graham Henderson, who I'd done film music with. And one of the first songs I wrote for the project went, 'I sit before your favourite painting…'. After that I thought, 'This is an interesting way of writing. You just write about exactly what's going on. No more, no less'.

"Just before the album came out ['Suitcase', credited to Neil Arthur rather than Delirious], 'One Day, One Time' got Single Of The Week from Chris Evans on Radio 1. They got me up to do an interview at half past six in the morning. Chris Evans said, 'Really liking the single, mate!', but it jumped when he played it. When he came back on air he said, 'That's a lovely new single from Neil Arthur, ex-Blancmange, but record company – please get a decent copy to me'.

"I think the radio interest in the record must have taken the label slightly by surprise. They didn't have the stock in the shops to take advantage of it. And that was that. Your moment's gone and it was back to the film music for me. No more photographs, no more interviews. But I didn't mind. Things didn't change until we got the songs together for 'Blanc Burn'."

What were his ambitions for the reformed Blancmange when they released 'Blanc Burn' in 2011? Did he expect to be sitting here a decade on, with another new album to promote?

175

176

"I was just hoping we'd be able to do a tour," he recalls. "But although Stephen's condition meant he was OK going into the studio to work on the record, it became clear there was no way he would be able to play live. So he told me, 'Get out there and bloody well do it'.

"After the tour, I said to myself, 'Well, what now?'. The logical thing was another album. We wanted to play some of the stuff on 'Happy Families' live, but I didn't want to do that unless we had new songs to offer people as well. I don't want to be living in the past. I want the risk. Some people don't, and I appreciate that, but I want to keep moving forward. I do reminisce, though. I'm very happy to look back. Some things I'd change and some things I wouldn't, but I wouldn't change anything that happened with Blancmange. I've made greater mistakes in my personal life than any I ever made with the band."

This last comment makes me think of the lyrics of 'Take Me', the final track on 'Private View'. They seem pretty confessional – "This is hardly a honeymoon / Picking up where we left off / Clearing pieces after the battle" – and I ask Neil if we're back to Helen again.

"I carry the weight of whatever mistakes I have made along the journey," he says. "You've got to learn from them, though. Nobody goes through a very close relationship without making mistakes, but it's a case of how many times will that person put up with it? And how many times will *you* put up with it? It's a song from both points of view, really. There's a bit of wordplay with the title 'Take Me' as well. There's some sexual innuendo there. But then it's also 'Take me… somewhere nice'. To that dream world, to that perfect zone. And thank you for constantly putting up with me."

Has he been that bad? I don't believe it. I have a decent radar for a wrong 'un and it's not even twitching.

"Do you want me to get her on the phone?" he jokes. "No, I'm a good lad, really, but I'm obviously aware of other situations I've read about or friends have shared with me. Everything gets stuffed into the Blanc blender! Everything is connected!"

He might be in his mid-60s, but Neil Arthur looks terrific. He's lean and tanned, with his hair neatly cropped. As a mark of his fitness, he plays competitive football in an FA league for the over-50s. We discuss the fortunes of his beloved Blackburn Rovers, his current favourite album ("'Waves' by Low Altitude – it's totally bloody gorgeous"), and his fascination with white plastic chairs. We also talk about the mysterious pixelated figure on the cover of 'Private View'. It's not Neil, as some people might assume. It's actually his art student daughter, Eleanor.

Four hours have passed. The waves of lunchtime diners have come and gone. The tables have been wiped clean. It's still roasting hot and they're still drilling round the back of the Southbank Centre. Touchingly, Neil says he's contemplating paying a surprise visit to Stephen Luscombe.

"I haven't seen him for a while, but we're always exchanging ridiculous messages," he says. "He's Irene and I'm Mavis, so when we message each other it's 'Hi Reen' and 'Love Mave'. We are like chalk and cheese, really. That helped us creatively, but I think Stephen would agree it can also be destructive. You get the best out of each other, but it ends up like a marriage. One of the reasons we stopped in 1986 was to save our friendship.

"I do wonder, with hindsight, if perhaps we should have got some help and carried on. We did a Greenpeace thing, standing with John Hurt next to an inflatable whale in Hyde Park – as you do – and then we went off to do a concert at the Royal Albert Hall. It was great to play there, but I was looking around thinking, 'For some reason, I'm not enjoying this. Everyone we're working with is lovely, but it's lost its Blancmange-ness'.

"I suppose we were becoming a victim in the machine. The creative work was fine, we were certainly up to that, but it was the business side that got to us. It was my fault because I really should have been aware of it. It wasn't easy to turn that off and I think I probably made it quite difficult for other people around me. When I walked away, it took a while for me to settle down. But I was very, very happy to remain friends with Stephen."

How different is Neil Arthur in 2022 to Neil Arthur in 1982?

"When I was 24, I thought I knew more than I actually did. The one thing I'm certain of now is that I'm not certain! And I'm very comfortable with that."

It's the idea of whittling down again, isn't it? I tell Neil that I'd recently come across an intriguing quote from Bruce Lee: "It's not the daily increase, but the daily decrease. Hack away the unessential."

"That's good," he nods. "Bloody hell. You know what, I went to the rubbish dump yesterday. I took a load of wood that had been in the shed for ages. As my dad would have said, 'Oooh, that's a nice piece of wood, that'. Anyway, I sawed it up and left it outside, thinking somebody might have it, but nobody did. So I took it down the dump with a bunch of other stuff, including lots of VHS cassettes of films I had taped over the years. Helen said to me, 'Have you ever watched them?'. I said, 'I'm never *going* to watch them'. She said, 'So why are you keeping them?'. I said, 'Er, I don't know'.

"So we put this stuff into boxes and took it down the dump. It was brilliant. I chucked it all away, putting things into the right skips so they could be recycled. I felt like I'd lost two stone."

He gives a chuckle, almost to himself.

"Someone said to me the other day, 'Do you mind doing your old songs?'. And I said, 'No, I'm into recycling!'. But there have been so many new albums since 2011… and that's where I am."

Everything *is* connected. All those dots, all those "bits in between", and even the two seemingly separate incarnations of Blancmange, especially with the return of the group to London Records. But with the ever-busy Neil Arthur, there will always be more stories to tell. That's guaranteed.

'Private View' is released by London on 30 September

DEEP FEELING FASCINATION

For her latest solo work, the mesmeric 'Let's Turn It Into Sound', American modular synthesist Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith explores complex emotions and communication, manipulating her voice into wordless entities. What she didn't expect was that they'd start talking back...

WORDS: MATT PARKER

You might not recognise the name Albert Mehrabian, but you've probably heard of his "7%-38%-55% rule". In the 1970s, the UCLA professor famously – and somewhat controversially – determined that when someone is communicating feelings and attitudes, only seven per cent of the meaning we derive is dependent on the words we hear, whereas 38 per cent of our reactions depend on the speaker's tone of voice and 55 per cent on their facial expressions.

To put it another way, the physical aspects of communicating emotions vastly outweigh the oral. It's something American electronicist Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith has always instinctively understood.

Raised and home-schooled on Washington State's remote Orcas Island, where her raw imagination was given room to grow, she naturally inclined towards exploring creative outlets, from singing and classical guitar to dance and, eventually, modular synthesis – in particular, the ergonomic delights of the Buchla Music Easel.

Training in composition and sound engineering at Berklee College of Music in Boston lent her work structure but didn't limit its scope. Smith has gone on to make albums incorporating field recordings, vocals, electronics and orchestral/acoustic instrumentation, drawing inspiration from an equally broad palette – meditation and yoga on 2014's 'Tides', the films of Studio Ghibli's Hayao Miyazaki for 2016's 'EARS', and dance on 'The Mosaic Of Transformation'. In 2016, she even teamed up with Suzanne Ciani for the expansive, Buchla-hued ambient record, 'Sunergy'.

There was a subtle irony to the fact that 'The Mosaic Of Transformation' – an album intrinsically linked to movement – arrived in May 2020, a few months after the world essentially stopped moving. It didn't stop Smith interacting, though, and the ensuing noise and bombardment have led directly to her latest long-player, 'Let's Turn It Into Sound'.

Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith's new album is a study in communication itself – and particularly of the alternatives when words fail you, when you have so much information and so many contradictory emotions that you cannot begin to describe, manage or even understand them.

"It came out as this response to feeling overwhelmed and a little bit helpless about a lot of things going on in the world," says Smith. "Like, 'Oh my gosh, there's so much happening – I'm just going to throw it all up and turn this into sound'. And I think that connected me back to the roots of art – these strong, somatic responses to things you can't really express in words. They're expressed in all of these senses and sensual reactions."

She began by exploring vocal manipulation, creating different tones and throat styles using her own voice and the endless flexibility of her modular set-up to create "new characters". The method proved so effective that she soon began to feel as if the sound finding its way back to her through the Buchla's circuits and filters was not entirely her own – or, at least, not of her conscious mind.

"It kind of came to me as... I guess I'll use the word 'entity'," says Smith of the album. "Like a voice of many voices, as if it was this gigantic integrated character – of technology and of organic natural being. It was talking to me, and I wanted to support it and get to know it. It didn't feel like my expression, but as I grew with it I was actually learning about myself."

Picture it as a sort of sonic 'Inception' – a journey into her own subconscious to meet the hitherto unknown characters residing there. At the time, Smith says she purposely avoided trying to associate the practice with "a logical rationale", and in doing so, was forced to loosen her grip on some old habits.

"There was one song in particular, 'Let It Fall', where I felt very aware of the bridles I was holding on myself," recalls Smith. "The concepts I learned at Berklee, the connection points everyone has for structure in music... I love them, but for me to make this album the way I wanted to, I had to let go of those structures. Sometimes when you are experiencing things you don't understand, it's just about letting them out in different ways. You need to let it fall apart to reveal a new piece of yourself."

For this reason, you can't relegate 'Let's Turn It Into Sound' to the pile of rapidly ageing "pandemic records". It's much braver and bolder than that. It isn't a retreat as such, but an exploration – with an anarchic streak, no less. Smith sees the cracks in things, but rather than try to patch them up with comfortable melodies and predictable compositional formats, she allows them to widen – revealing novel, colourful spaces. She claims this has given her a "new form of stability", both musically and mentally.

In that sense, her work flies in the face of the comfort culture of recent years, which has inhabited everything from our politics and daily habits to film and TV binges and, of course, the music we consume. In 2022, it often seems as if everything is being held together with tape and string, and we're all afraid to move in case it falls apart. Deep down, though, we know we'll have to take a leap eventually – to do *something* – even if it means enduring a little discomfort.

"It's like, I love learning from pop," posits Smith. "And while making this record, I noticed I love listening to it because my brain understands it right away. It gives my brain something to do – it follows along and goes quiet. Then I noticed that when I listen to jazz, my brain doesn't know what to do – it just has to surrender and experience it. That was something I was really inspired by."

The rebellious streak of 'Let's Turn It Into Sound' is only part of the picture, though. It is anarchic, but not in a punk-ish sense. Instead, the tone is more that of a childlike state of fearless playfulness – lawless, gleeful and with a short attention span.

This is intended as a compliment – dabble in any art form as an adult and you'll know it's tough to get yourself into that sort of mental space. To take those repeated leaps of faith takes guts.

"It was really playful," agrees Smith. "It was exciting. I've always had this joy in music that anything can connect together, and this album was probably the most I've played in that world."

Listen to 'Is It Me Or Is It You?' and you'll hear the truth in her statement. The track flits from ambient vocal washes to arpeggiated synth and horn-inflected jazz tones, before ricocheting into nonsense verse. There are many voices speaking, but no real words. It's like a physical presence, an alien trying to communicate with you.

Having recently begun to learn freestyle dance, Smith is clearly allowing some of this unrestrictive delivery to rub off on her. 'Let's Turn It Into Sound' sounds noticeably more supple as a result.

"You're playing in that structure until you find your own," she reasons. "This album is me playing more in my freestyle form of music."

'Let's Turn It Into Sound' also demonstrates the wider relationship Smith often has with her work. There's a kinetic activity involved in any form of music-making, whether you're strumming a guitar or clicking a mouse, but Smith seems to have a unique physical bond with her music.

"I have synaesthesia, and how I experience it is through the visual, the auditory and the kinaesthetic," she explains. "So I feel the movement intensely, musically, in my body, and I experience sound in a very kinaesthetic way. Even in the way someone talks to me… sometimes I'll have this inner dance going on to the rhythm of their delivery. There's always a kind of inner choreography happening to sound."

Why, then, has someone who experiences sound as movement settled on the wires and modules of a Buchla synth, as opposed to a more physically reactive instrument? Surely Smith would have been a natural drummer or a masterful brass player?

"Maybe I should have been a drummer!" she exclaims. "I guess it's because storytelling is very inspiring to me and has been ever since I was little. Communicating without using words has always felt fulfilling, too. I had a connection with animals when I was younger, and when I found synthesisers, I felt like I was in a zoo full of animals that hadn't been discovered yet. It took me back to that original seed of creativity I felt as a kid. It just feels endless in the fun it offers."

KAITLYN AURELIA SMITH

"Fun" is a good word for 'Let's Turn It Into Sound'. At one point during its production, Smith reportedly strapped on a subwoofer backpack and went marching into a West Coast windstorm, listening to the low end while 60mph gusts swirled around her.

"I just thought to myself, 'That sounds like a *lot* of fun'," she chuckles. "And it really was. It was very dramatic."

Elsewhere, there's a hint of Tom Tom Club cheek in the album's flippy-floppy, genreless patchwork, albeit through the mind of someone with an ambient, compositional background. It delights in showcasing and juxtaposing its synth-based, animalistic entities. Contrasting the shimmering and the rough, the skittish and the slow, the high and the low, the moody and the light-hearted, it's certainly a little woozy, appealing weird and delightfully avant-garde but, above all, joyfully vivid.

"Someone once told me instruments were created as extensions of the voice, to do what the voice couldn't," says Smith. "Whether it's true or not, it's always resonated, and it's fun to think about music like that. It starts with singing and feeling it in my body. When I can't physically make a sound, I say, 'How can I find an extension of it?'."

Smith admits she's still not sure of the story her music and characters are relaying, or precisely what she was trying to impart in the hours spent translating messages from her subconscious.

"I actually wrote a whole little book with my questions on this experience of sound," she reveals. "What fascinated me throughout the process of making this album is how there's this whole 'other' brain experiencing stuff in sound, but not fully translating it into my conscious brain.

"I think maybe this is what you're tapping into with the childlike aspect of it. Kids so naturally allow their feelings to move quickly from one to the other and go through their flow. It's like this beautiful web that creates a story."

Smith also explains the more linear "hero's journey" arc to the record, at least in the sonic AI at its core.

"The characters are going through their own doubts, insecurities and all that stuff to find their own self-expression," she says. "It's all very inspirational."

Despite – or perhaps because of – the sense of humour that was so crucial in its formulation, 'Let's Turn It Into Sound' has helped Smith to tackle some more profound questions relating to her practice as an artist and composer, as well as the confines of her gender. Removing the forms, labels and superfluous words – Mehrabian's seven per cent – has enabled her to think much more clearly and openly about the rest of her life.

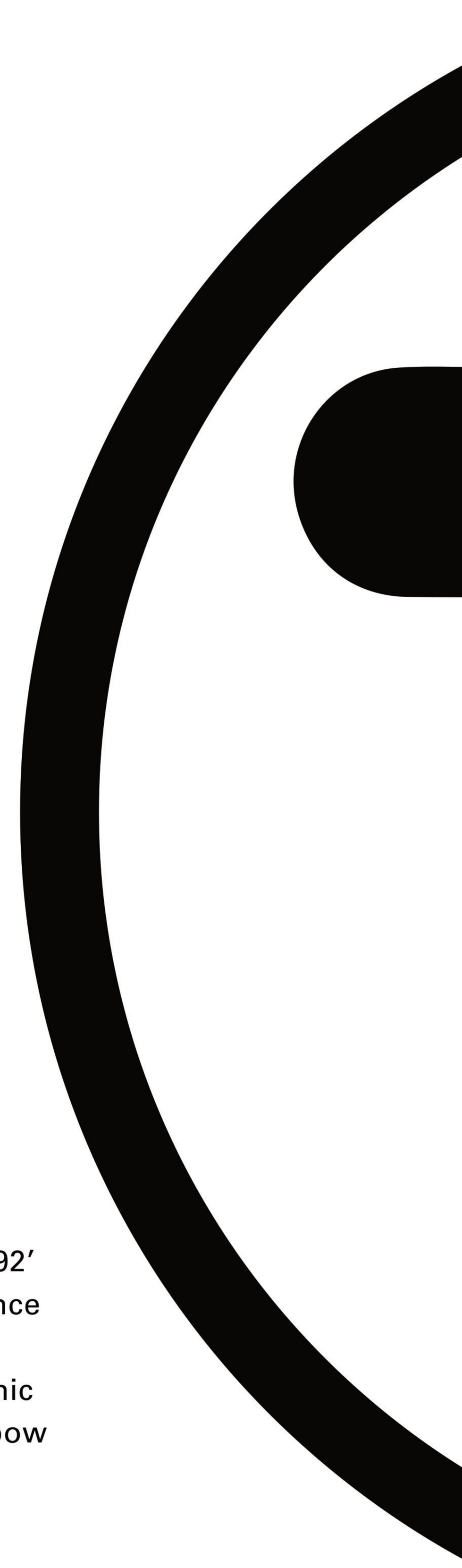
"It helped me learn about my own gender and identity," she offers. "And also trusting myself, feeling OK as a very fluid person in all areas of life. That's what I'm trying to do – to allow myself to be comfortable by not conforming.

"In the past, I have always been inspired by others who have been innovative – they trust themselves and go into new territories. And it can be quite a scary thing to do.

"So much of it is finding the most vulnerable spots within yourself and diving deep to ask, 'What is something only I can do, that I can share?'. This album is the beginning of that journey for me."

'Let's Turn It Into Sound' is out now on Ghostly International

I AM THE MUSIC MAKER



The impact of ‘Selected Ambient Works 85-92’ can’t be overstated. In the three decades since its initial release, it has minted the myth of Aphex Twin and redefined ambient, electronic and dance music. Richard D James, take a bow

WORDS: BEN GILBERT

Famously, Aphex Twin doesn't really do interviews, but that hasn't always been the case. In October 1996, I had an encounter with electronic music's singularly talented but most elusive artist, when Richard D James was contemplating changing the course of electronic music history again.

At the time, Warp Records were about to release his eponymous new album, and there was growing momentum behind his transformation from ambient bedroom tinkerer to demonic Aphex Twin deep fake, a techno horror-show figure as likely to be seen leering from a TV screen as within the pages of a serious music magazine.

"I think my stuff will cross over – but not because I want it to," James told me back then. "I like doing avant-garde music, but my favourite material is when I make it as complicated and as easy to listen to as possible. That brings mystery into it. When it's just avant-garde, it's purely mathematical and thought through."

Many people have played a role in what has become an apocryphal tale – one befitting contemporary Cornish folklore – which was conceived at his family home in the village of Lanner at England's southwestern tip, when James (now 51) was barely a teenager.

In many respects, though, the story of his impact on mainstream culture begins with his debut album, 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92'. Currently celebrating its 30th anniversary, and cited by Warp as "the birthplace and benchmark of electronic music", it stands as a singular testament to his prodigious talent.

The first official Aphex Twin record was 'Analogue Bubblebath', an EP issued by Mighty Force in September 1991. Its four tracks were culled from one of the many tapes distributed by James to the friends who saw him DJ as part of a burgeoning electronic music scene centred around Newquay's Bowgie Inn, The Shire Horse pub in St Ives and outdoor raves along the Cornish coastline.

Mighty Force label owner Mark Darby, who had opened a record shop of the same name six months earlier in Exeter, explains how he came across James' earliest recordings. A cassette containing 21 tracks (since lost in a house flood) was handed to him by a customer – a certain Tom Middleton, who went on to find fame as one half of Global Communication.

"Tom was at Taunton Art College," says Darby. "He brought in a tape and said, 'Play this'. I'd never heard anything like it. It was completely different to everything else. Tom suggested we make an EP but I didn't know how to run a record label – I'd never really thought about it."

Darby recalls being charged with choosing the running order for the label's first release, which included the Middleton co-production, 'En Trance To Exit'. Not that they had an agreement with the actual musician whose name was on the cover.

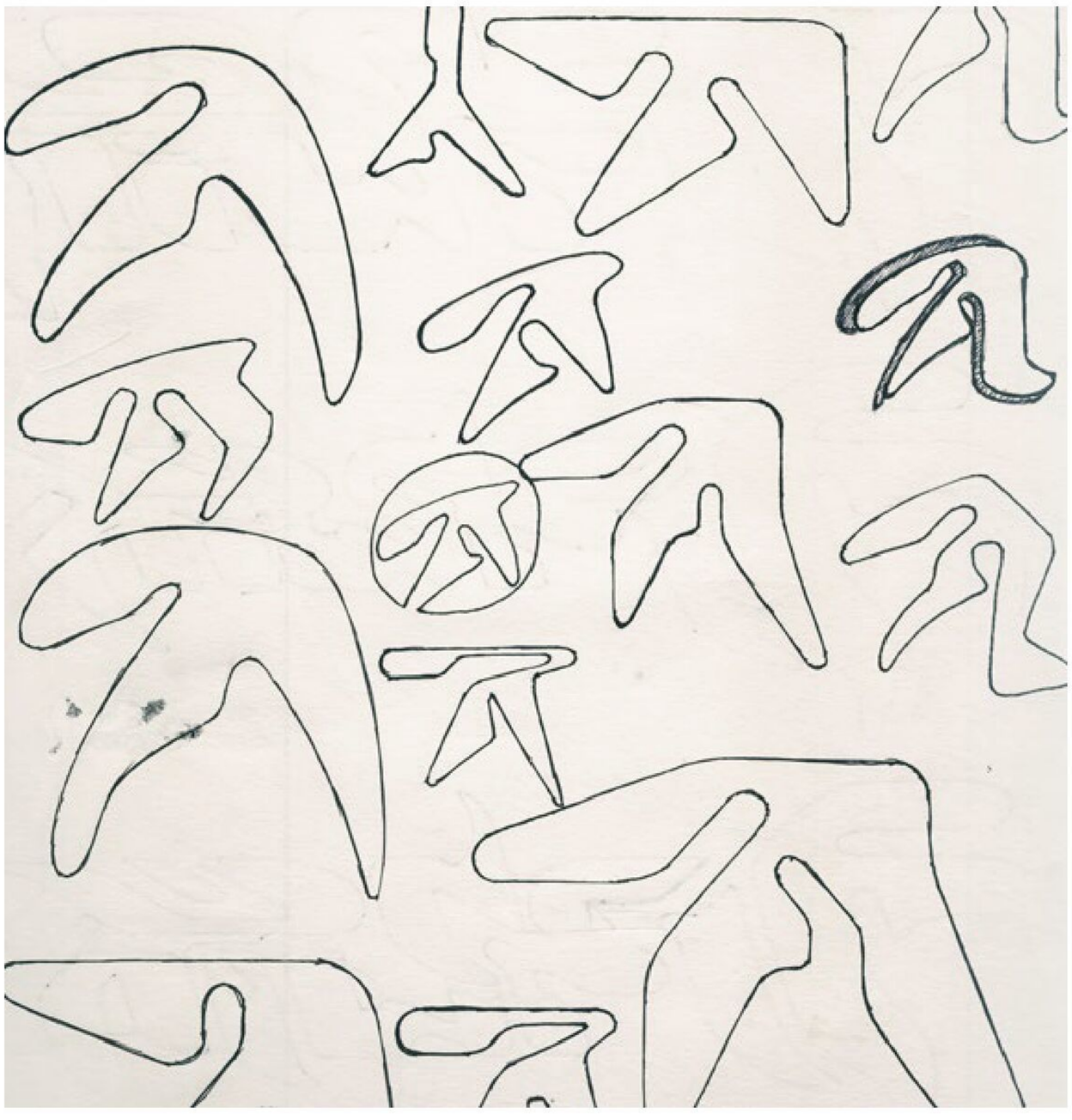
"What I didn't realise was that Richard didn't want to make a record at all," he says. "It took quite a lot of persuading to get him to sign something saying that we could release his music. To this day, he's still the only person I've ever had any kind of written contract with."

A deal was eventually reached, in typically outlandish circumstances.

"Richard was playing at the Alpha rave in Plymouth," continues Darby. "I spoke to him backstage. He was tripping, although I didn't find that out until later. I said, 'We really need to release this – it's too good not to. Sign this bit of paper and it'll be out in a few weeks'. I think he did it just to get rid of me because of the state he was in!"

The initial 500 pressings of 'Analogue Bubblebath' served notice of what was to come. Mighty Force's limited distribution, which saw boxes hand-delivered to shops in Cornwall and beyond, was picked up by figures such as Kiss FM's Colin Dale, tastemakers like Andrew Weatherall and publications including DJ and Mixmag.

This is also where the myth-making began. Darby says that Mighty Force's original press campaign included claims that the demo "had arrived in a Cornish pasty", and that Richard D James "DJed in tin mines".



James was subsequently picked up by Colin Favor and Gordon Matthewman's Rabbit City label, who issued 'Analog Bubblebath Vol 2' – featuring the 'Aboriginal Mix' track (later released as 'Digeridoo') – at the end of 1991. Then in November the following year, Belgian electronic music titans R&S Records signed James to a deal that would eventually lead to 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92'.

By now, James was studying electronics at Kingston Polytechnic in southwest London, which is where fellow students Mike Paradinas – aka µ-Ziq and founder/owner of the Planet Mu label – and Paul Nicholson – the graphic designer responsible for the iconic Aphex logo – enter the story.

It started when Nicholson met a girl from Perranwell in Cornwall, who had frequented the Bowgie Inn and knew James. She introduced the pair and a friendship developed.

"I was with Richard in the student halls of residence when he got a call from Renaat Vandepapeliere from R&S asking him to sign," remembers Nicholson. "At the time, it was *the* label, and obviously he was foaming at the mouth."

A full-length release was planned, requiring a visual ident for a musician who already seemed to be operating on a higher plane.

"A friend from the year above me, Charles Uzzell-Edwards – graffiti artist Pure Evil – was into skate fashion and had moved out to San Francisco to work with the clothing brand Anarchic Adjustment after finishing his degree," continues Nicholson.

"He said they were working on new graphics and that everything in California was about UFOs, aliens, Area 51, probes and crop circles. I've always loved science fiction – authors such as William Gibson and films like 'Alien' – and I'd been working on a few things that seemed to fit what the label wanted.

"Richard saw my sketches and picked up on the soft-form, amorphic, curvaceous look. When 'Analogue Bubblebath' came out, he was using phrases like 'squidgy acid'. He wanted something that looked futuristic but wasn't all masculine straight edges and sharp corners – the opposite of the traditional industrial look of techno."

Meanwhile, Paradinas was studying architecture and living in the same halls of residence as James. Friends told him about "this guy making strange electronic music, a bit like mine – you'd hear weird industrial noise when you walked past his window". After sending James a demo tape, Paradinas eventually met up with him at London's legendary Knowledge club and the pair went on to collaborate in 1996 on 'Expert Knob Twiddlers', as Mike & Rich.

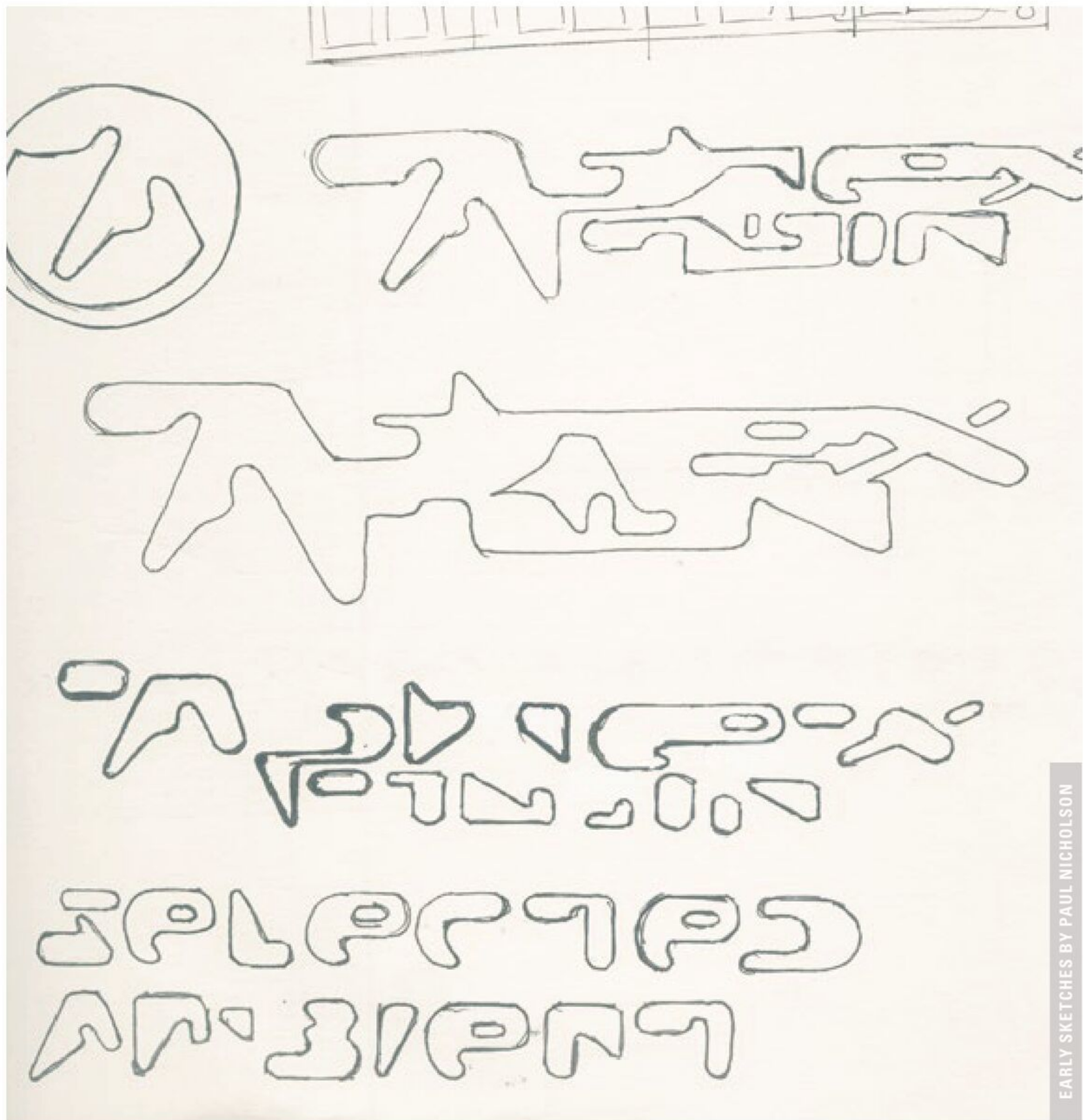
Like Nicholson, Paradinas had already heard Aphex Twin's music on the then-pirate-radio station, Kiss FM. He says both 'Analogue Bubblebath' albums had "wowed me with their unique UK take on techno". By the time 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92' landed, Paradinas considered himself an Aphex Twin "fanatic".

Of course, it's important not to overlook the prolific and dynamic range of Richard D James records that appeared under a variety of guises during this period, some of which Paradinas had been introduced to when visiting Middleton and his Global Communication cohort Mark Pritchard, who were planning to release the first µ-Ziq 12-inch on their Exeter-based label, Evolution.

"Tom had played me some of his Aphex Twin cassettes with all the unreleased material, including tracks which came out on 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92'," says Paradinas. "This was what my friends and I had been waiting for from Aphex. Not just an ambient album, it was both pastoral UK techno that pushed boundaries *and* a pop record.

"'Xtal', which I'd first heard on Tom's tape in a different, more drum-machine version, was one of the highlights – a heavenly melody smothered in reverb and tape compression, which gave it an otherworldly quality. The whole album was otherworldly. 'Tha' and 'Hedphelym' used the handmade sounds we knew from the 12-inch records but in a different context. It all joined up and made sense as a new sound world."

Paradinas describes 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92' as a "cultural moment", and the album's various influences clearly made a big impression on him.



EARLY SKETCHES BY PAUL NICHOLSON

"A bit of Joey Beltram in the basslines, Neutron 9000 in the synths, and the choir stabs in 'Ptolemy' sounded like 'Illusion' by R-Tyme," he says. "But he made everything his own. I think my favourite was 'Green Calx', which combined the ghostly melodies and acid from his Caustic Window EPs with a soaring ambience. The whole record showed that whatever we had thought about Aphex Twin from his previous work was right, but I think his ambitions were wider than techno."

In terms of sound design, this was James taking the notion of ambient and the possibilities of techno way beyond Earth's atmosphere – from 'Music For Airports' to 'Music For Space Stations', if you will.

"I really like it," reflected James, four years after the album came out. "It's nostalgic for me, more so than any of the others, because it was based on a tape that was going around when we were having loads of parties in Cornwall. That's why it means more to me."

The Aphex Twin logo first appeared on the 'Xylem Tube' EP in June 1992. This saw Nicholson's vision expand beyond a basic initial (which James apparently likened to a sigil – a symbol derived from neolithic magic and occultism) into a full Xylem typeface. His design work is now internationally identifiable, but his memories seem somewhat tainted by the breakdown of his relationship with James after the pair collaborated on the spectacularly complex sleeve art for the second Aphex album, 'Selected Ambient Works Volume II'.

"It's kind of strange and a double-edged sword – I don't mind telling people that I haven't made a penny off the logo," admits Nicholson, who signed an agreement transferring ownership of the brand identity to James when they were sharing a house in Hackney, east London. However, he considers their collaboration a "privilege". It even included a spell as Aphex Twin's dancer, commencing with his debut show at the legendary Berlin venue, Tresor.

The cult of Aphex has grown so many heads that it might be considered a visitation from the video for 1997's 'Come To Daddy'. It's this film and the follow-up, 1999's 'Windowlicker' – both directed by Chris Cunningham – that truly embossed Aphex's mischievous, devilish presence on the imagination of popular culture. While the more insidious, fantastical and surreal storytelling started to emerge in the promo around 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92', James' purported ability to make music while sleeping came a little later, shortly before the release of 'Selected Ambient Works Volume II'.

"Just before I started work on this album, I tried experimenting with the idea of dreaming about recording tracks," he announced in a Melody Maker interview with Push in January 1994. "As the album progressed, I found that I was able to train myself to do it pretty much whenever I wanted to. Lucid dreaming is not really uncommon, but most people are only able to control the visual element. With a bit of practice, it's relatively easy to dream about meeting a certain person or having a shag, but it's more difficult to dream about sounds. Dreaming about tastes and smells is also great fun. I've even tried inventing new foods and dreaming about what they taste like."

"I still lucid dream all the time, but I don't really do tracks like that consciously anymore," he told me in 1996. "I can do whatever I like when I'm asleep if I've got good control over the dream – it's like another existence. I reckon most people can learn how to do it. I taught myself by accident, and I didn't even know I was doing it or that it was lucid dreaming until I got into the music business and people told me."

Author and music critic David Toop, who first interviewed James in 1992, explores this in his 1995 book, 'Ocean Of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound And Imaginary Worlds', describing his subject as "either a serious person who has never been taken seriously or a practical joker who has been taken too seriously for too long".

Toop also contributed to John Doran's acclaimed 2018 Aphex Twin BBC Radio 4 documentary, his interviews framing a young man so utterly captivated by the arrival of a woodworm-infested piano at the family home that he reimagined the instrument's function, turning the keys to the wall and playing the strings.

James' childhood hobbies were "vandalising things, getting into stone fights, riding my bike, catapults, air guns, arcades". So did he have any aspirations?

"I remember wanting to be a lawyer when I was about three because I thought that's what miners were called, and that's what my dad did," he said. "After that, I remember not wanting to be anything. That was my ambition. I don't like doing anything for anyone else. I never have. As I got older, I realised that music would probably be the way to do it."

'Selected Ambient Works 85-92' is routinely described as having changed the course of electronic music history. But, arguably, Richard D James' greatest achievement was bringing the most disturbing version of his work – aesthetically, at least – into mainstream environments. It was certainly a crossover he'd given some thought to.

"I don't plan to do it," he said. "I'd think for about 10 minutes and then do it. I'd know how to market it, and it would work."

In 1999, 'Windowlicker' became Aphex Twin's biggest single to date, charting at Number 16 in the UK, with Chris Cunningham's arresting 10-minute video becoming a worldwide hit and earning a nomination for Best British Video at the BRIT Awards 2000.

A major influence on a whole slew of artists from Daft Punk and Deadmau5 to Skrillex, James is cited by Thom Yorke as being responsible for Radiohead's transition to electronica on 2000's 'Kid' album. But for electronic composer, producer and musician Gazelle Twin, it was this manipulation of identity that really struck her as a teenager and would one day inform her own artistic strategy.

"I'd never seen anything like that dark comedy body-horror of 'Windowlicker' on 'Top Of The Pops' before," she recalls. "It was frightening and it really made an impression – the humour and those elements of the grotesque were captivating but scary."

Paul Nicholson, meanwhile, describes James' painstaking compositional technique as "haphazard meticulousness".

"I think he has a real connection – almost like an OCD obsession – with music," he muses. "It is everything he lives and breathes for."

For Gazelle Twin, James attempting to deconstruct his creativity highlights a "neurodivergent way of thinking".

"I get that sense from the mood of the music, the themes, the song titles and his reluctanceto be present and do loads of publicity," she says. "Whether it was a conscious decision to keep away from promotional stuff makes it more intriguing. I think people naturally want to lean into something or somebody who feels mysterious."

From Aphex Twin to AFX, Bradley Strider, Caustic Window, Polygon Window, The Dice Man, The Tuss and user18081971 – reportedly Richard D James' current incarnation on Soundcloud – this is an incomparable story. From the analogue era right through to the digital age, it now stretches into a fourth decade and encompasses a daunting, sprawling back catalogue of cosmic, beatific and clangorous soundscapes.

'Selected Ambient Works 85-92' offers a clue to the journey. The track 'We Are The Music Makers' famously samples Gene Wilder from 1971's 'Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory'. To further paraphrase Arthur O'Shaughnessy's 1873 poem, 'Ode': "We are the music makers / And we are the dreamers of dreams / Yet we are the movers and shakers / Of the world for ever, it seems."

Hear and buy a selection of releases from Richard D James' back catalogue at aphextwin.warp.net

HERE COMES THE SUN

PYE CORNER AUDIO

Materialising from sonic dystopia and shadows into bright light, “analogue evangelist” Martin Jenkins and Ride guitarist Andy Bell join forces on ‘Let’s Emerge!’, the dazzling new Pye Corner Audio album

WORDS: WILL SALMON

The UK is in the thick of an unprecedented heatwave. The last few days have been marked by 38-degree temperatures, flagging transport systems and dire – if entirely sensible – warnings to stay indoors. For those more used to England’s perma-grey skies, it’s been punishing, to say the least.

Today though, things seem to have settled down a bit. It feels like a balmy summer’s evening in London, rather than a harbinger of climate apocalypse. On Little Portland Street, people are milling around, waiting for tonight’s show at The Social, taking selfies in front of a mural of the much-missed “Guv’nor”, Andy Weatherall. And inside, in a booth at the far end of the bar, two men are cheerfully reminiscing about where they first met – at this exact venue, in fact.

On the left is the Head Technician himself, Martin Jenkins, best known to readers of this magazine for his acclaimed work as Pye Corner Audio. He’s the relentlessly prolific breakout star of the Ghost Box roster, and a firm favourite of documentarian Adam Curtis and ‘Black Mirror’ mastermind, Charlie Brooker. On the right is guitarist Andy Bell – co-founder of shoegaze heroes Ride, GLOK electronicist and a celebrated solo artist in his own right – also no stranger to these pages.

They’re here for a special one-off performance of the terrific new Pye Corner Audio album, ‘Let’s Emerge!’, on which Bell adds lush guitar melodies to Jenkins’ sumptuous soundscapes. At the time of writing, the record’s only been out for a few days, but it’s already being hailed as one of the year’s most exciting electronic releases – and rightly so. Even amid both artists’ varied and often brilliant discographies, it’s an immediate standout, a stunning collaboration that brings warmth and optimism to a year that has so far lacked many reasons to be cheerful.

“We initially met at the Sonic Cathedral 15th birthday event,” reminisces Jenkins. “Right here, in this booth. We were both doing our own sets, then got chatting afterwards and ended up getting quite drunk and setting the world to rights. I’d been a fan of Ride for a long time, and we just seemed to have a lot in common.”

“I’d done a tiny little set, two tracks in between bdrmm and Martin,” explains Bell. “I went to the bar and then I heard Martin starting downstairs – I think it was ‘Lost Ways’ [from 2016’s ‘Stasis’ LP]. I remember hearing this kick drum and the bar emptied as everyone went off to watch. I didn’t know his stuff back then, but I was like, ‘Yeah! This is my kind of thing!’. I was blown away by it.”

The performance in question is documented on 2020’s ‘Social Dissonance’, and the pair ended the night with loose plans to work together somewhere down the line. By this point, Bell was planning to release his first music as a solo artist and was keen to find ways to establish himself outside the confines of his various band projects.

“Nat [Nathaniel Cramp – Sonic Cathedral founder] had approached me and said, ‘Have you got anything you can offer me for the Singles Club?’. I was sitting on a huge amount of material I’d done over the years. I’d always thought, ‘When the time is right, when the stars align, I’ll do something that’s not part of a band’. So in the heat of the moment, I agreed to do it.”

Choosing exactly what to put out, however, was not easy.

“The heaviness of this decision – picking two tracks to put out for a seven-inch single – started to weigh down on me,” remembers Bell. “I wanted to go into an area where it had a real late night, intimate, Arthur Russell or Big Star’s ‘Sister Lovers’ feel. You know, not have any drums, keep it quite sparse, something a band wouldn’t do. So I started from there.”

The result was a series of singles and EPs, including the blissful psych-folk strum of 2020’s ‘Cherry Cola’. When Bell needed a remix for it, he knew exactly who to turn to. The Pye Corner Audio re-rub of ‘Cherry Cola’ adds Jenkins’ trademark metronomic kicks and analogue menace, while retaining the song’s conviviality, hopefulness and general good vibes. Several more PCA remixes followed, all collected on the ‘Indica Gallery’ and ‘See My Friends’ EPs. The seed was sown.

That same sense of euphoria seems to have rubbed off on 'Let's Emerge!'. Where Jenkins' work is often characterised by a sense of brooding unease – see any of his releases on Ghost Box or 2015's 'Prowler' on More Than Human – 'Let's Emerge!' shimmers with the heat haze of high summer, particularly 'Warmth Of The Sun' and the slow-burn psych of 'Sun Stroke'. The newfound joy radiating from its grooves is also reflected in the exuberant title and Marc Jones' bold, typographic cover design.

It is, however, an album born out of difficult circumstances. Yes, we're talking in part about the pandemic and lockdown, of course, but also a turbulent period in Jenkins' life.

"I don't want to go into it too much, but last year was quite tough for me," he admits. "Making this felt like some kind of a release. It just felt right and good to be doing something a little bit brighter. I needed to look ahead and focus on the future. It's not too sugary but I think, sonically, it's optimistic. For me, making it was very cathartic."

The album started out as a four-track EP with a consciously stripped-back sound.

"I had packed up my studio, so I basically used the bare minimum of equipment," recalls Jenkins. "Just a few pieces, some favourite gear and a couple of new bits. Making it was a process of exploring, which is quite nice. I ended up with four tracks, and it was a different vibe to my usual stuff. I was really enjoying it, though, so I said to Nat, 'I think there's more where this came from…'."

As the music came together, however, Jenkins realised something was missing.

"Most of the time, I will fill every space on a record," he admits. "But I felt with this that I was subconsciously leaving a lot of space for something else."

A good point, then, for Andy Bell to step in and return the favour following those remixes. Although 'Let's Emerge!' isn't billed as a full Pye Corner Audio/Andy Bell collaboration, Bell is absolutely integral to the sound, lending his textural guitar chops to half of the album.

"I really wasn't quite sure what I was going to be getting," admits Bell when asked how he had approached the partnership. "But then when I played the [work-in-progress] tracks from Martin, I was like, 'OK, I get where he's at with this. I know what kind of thing to go with'."

Bell took a fairly loose approach, generating a lot of material, but ultimately leaving Jenkins to figure out how everything fitted together.

"I gave him a lot to play with," says Bell. "I didn't try to tie him down too much to specific parts – I let him create them out of what I'd done. I did maybe two or three takes per song with different sounds and different textures, then I left him to construct it."

"I was almost dreading getting 16 parts for every track," laughs Jenkins. "But you could feel that it was a real performance. So for me, it was a case of placing pieces here and there, putting things in the right place, while trying to keep the general structure of what Andy had done."

"The next thing we've got to do is get in a room and do one live," says Bell with a grin.

Perhaps part of what makes 'Let's Emerge!' feel so coherent is the shared reference points between its two creators. Spacemen 3 were a formative influence on the young members of Ride and remain a guiding star for Bell today. Jenkins is also a huge fan. Another shared love is Stereolab, whose debut LP offered both aural and visual inspiration.

"One of the things I said to Marc Jones about the cover was, 'Do you know 'Peng!' by Stereolab? That's what I'm looking for'," says Jenkins. "I was a full-on metaller when I first heard Stereolab. I bought 'Peng!' on cassette. It had this weird half-sleeve that only covered part of the tape, and when I saw it, I thought, 'That looks interesting – I'm gonna get it'.

"I remember a lot of my mates taking the piss out of me, saying, 'That's definitely not heavy metal!'. But I was completely blown away by it. I think the repetition is what interested me. And that was my entry into other sorts of music, because I was only really into house and heavy metal at that point."

"What kind of metal were you into?" asks Bell.

"A lot of classic rock and thrash – Black Sabbath, Suicidal Tendencies…" replies Jenkins.

"Oh yeah, I got into them for a while because of that film, 'Repo Man'," nods Bell. "It's got Suicidal Tendencies on the soundtrack. That was a good film! Our drum tech recently played me an album by Gojira called 'From Mars To Sirius', and it blew me away. It's super-intense. He put it on extremely loud on our tour bus and I was like, 'Oh yeah!'. Certain heavy metal just resonates."

There's even, I suggest, a tiny bit of The Beatles' radiant psychedelia in the DNA of 'Let's Emerge!'.

"Yeah, they were great at bringing things like minimalism into the mainstream," agrees Bell. "All these modern classical ideas that were knocking around in the 60s – they brought them in. 'Tomorrow Never Knows' is a Trojan horse for those ideas."

"I'm a massive fan of The Beatles," says Jenkins, nodding. "I always thought 'Yellow Submarine' was a nursery rhyme because we used to listen to it all the time at school. But it's a pop record. It's not music that's been there forever – it's relatively recent."

Martin Jenkins has been releasing records as Pye Corner Audio for 12 years now, starting with the cult classic 'Black Mill Tapes' series in 2010. As those albums found an audience, he drew the attention of Ghost Box, with whom he's released four LPs and several singles. A steady stream of releases on labels as diverse as More Than Human, Lapsus and Ecstatic have filled out his sound, as have several aliases – The Head Technician, for instance, is more straightforward house and acid techno aimed squarely at the dancefloor, while The House In The Woods project is all about doom drones and ominous tones. So how does he feel his sound has changed over the last decade or so?

"I'm not sure if the music has evolved," says Jenkins. "I work with a lot of labels and, without being cynical, I do try to get a bit of a handle on what each label is about and steer the music to fit. It's an opportunity to explore these different aspects, because it's all in me, you know?"

"I get that," agrees Bell. "This is a really great Sonic Cathedral record as much as it's a great Pye Corner Audio LP. It's good that it's like that. It's a bit like Miles Davis working with Gil Evans on stuff that's orchestral, and then going off and doing something that's more for the jazz club."

"And it keeps it interesting," adds Jenkins. "Whenever I'm doing a new album – any album – I want to try to break it up a bit, and this was a very good opportunity to do that."

Is there a through-line to all of this music, though, I wonder? An element that he thinks unites the many facets of his sound?

"I always want to have some kind of undercurrent of oddness in whatever I make, even if you can hardly hear it," he says. "It's probably more easily apparent in the earlier Pye Corner Audio tracks. I spend a lot of time making things people probably won't hear but are just bubbling away. I like the idea of having stuff in there. If you've got those layers in your music, then you can listen to something for years and years and make out things you've never picked up on before."

'Let's Emerge!' is out now on Sonic Cathedral

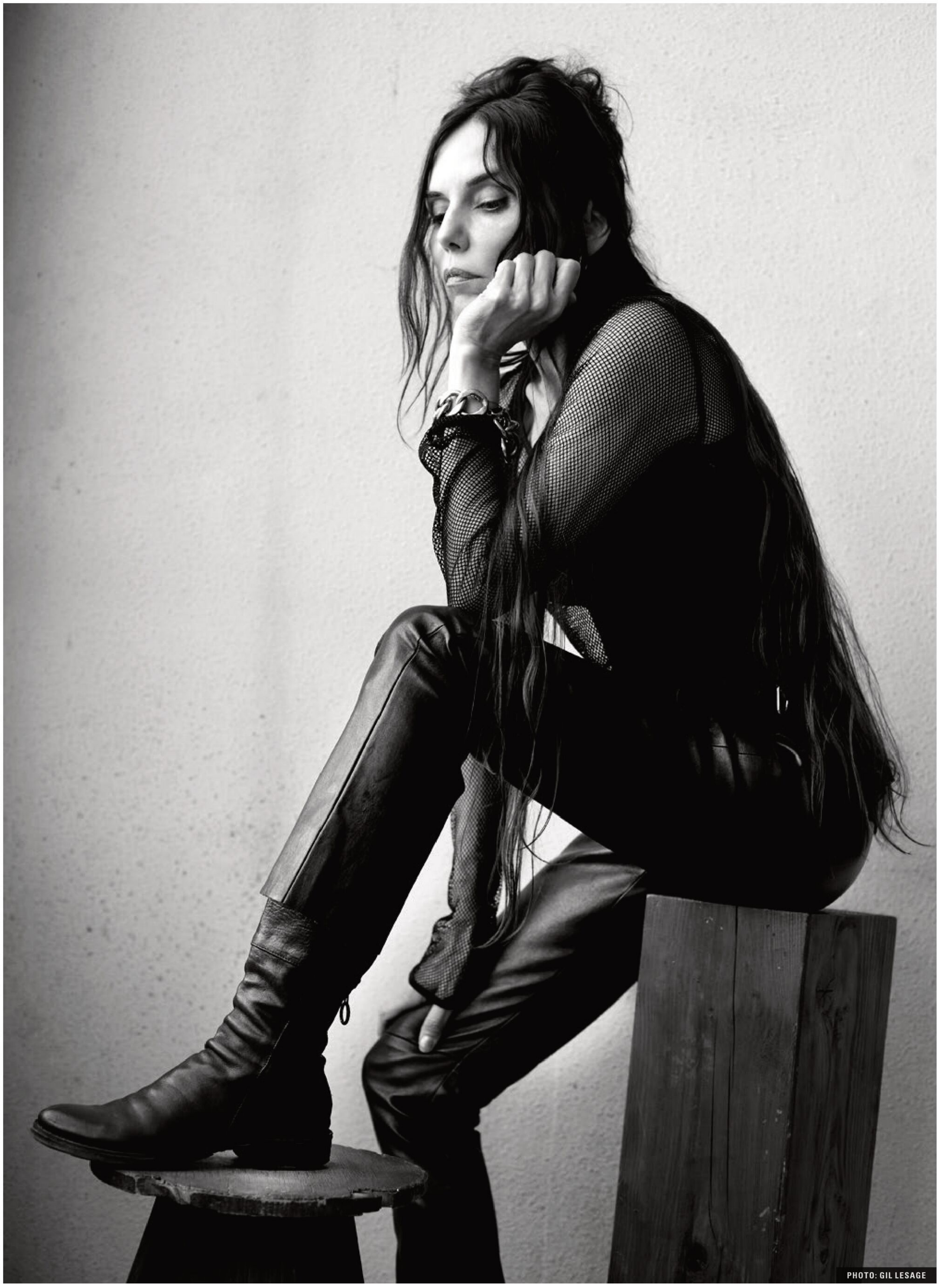


PHOTO: GIL LESAGE

MUSIC FROM BIG PINK

Unloved might be best known for soundtracking ‘Killing Eve’, but their third long-player, ‘The Pink Album’, widens the scope. Epic yet intimate, and gloriously diverse, it’s a beautifully spun fusion of psych hallucinations, fearless invention and melancholic jazz – and that’s only the half of it

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN

Unloved’s latest studio album is big, pink and impressive. Featuring 22 tracks, with contributions from Jarvis Cocker and French popster Étienne Daho, among others, ‘The Pink Album’ is a veritable smorgasbord of moods, textures and genres, held together by Jade Vincent’s unmistakable, world-weary croon. Easily the most ambitious thing they’ve done, it feels as if Unloved are entering their own technicolour era. Moreover, that promise of musical variety and abundance will undoubtedly remind students of pop of The Beatles’ seminal, self-titled 1968 record, better known as ‘The White Album’.

“Yeah, I mean, wow, we definitely didn’t want to be putting ourselves in the same strata as The Beatles,” insists the band’s keyboardist and composer Keefus Ciancia, recoiling from the very suggestion.

Ciancia is speaking from an Airbnb off West Hollywood’s Sunset Strip with Jade Vincent – his partner – sitting alongside him. The album title was inspired by British graphic designer Julian “Ghost Box” House, who has helped to define the Unloved aesthetic by producing all their artwork to date, including this release’s brooding portrait of Vincent in a fierce pink duotone.

“When we saw that picture, I came straight out with it and said, ‘Let’s just call it ‘The Pink Album’,” says Ciancia.

David Holmes, the other third of the trio, speaks to me the following day from his studio in Belfast, and he’s less hesitant when it comes to the tacit reference.

“It was Keefus’ idea to call it ‘The Pink Album’ and I said straightaway, ‘Yes, that’s the title – it’s great’. Pink is the colour I associate with punk and, in a way, it’s another version of ‘The White Album’.”

That Unloved work so well is due in no small part to this difference of perspective and the physical distance between its members – while Holmes is in Northern Ireland, Ciancia and Vincent usually resident in Saint-Malo, north-western France.

It’s “their band”, says Holmes of Ciancia and Vincent, although they clearly wouldn’t be without him. And for good reason. This is David Holmes – the celebrated Northern Irish DJ, electronic music producer and composer who Steven Soderbergh customarily commissions for soundtracks.

Holmes calls the equally award-laden Ciancia “a fucking genius” and coos when he talks about Vincent’s existential vocals. These are the elegant threads binding everything, with an aura of 1950s girl groups and yé-yé, “old” Hollywood and the French new wave. Shadow Morton and Joe Meek. Roy Orbison seen through the refracted lens of David Lynch. A hint of Brel here, a flourish of Morricone there. It’s truly breathtaking stuff.

In a sense, Holmes is the outsider looking in, bringing a uniquely European world view that adds to the already uncanny sheen of Unloved yet another layer to lose yourself in. Given the changing circumstances, that universe has expanded vastly on the new record.

“I don’t think we intended to do this album a certain way – we just let everything evolve in its own direction,” explains Vincent. “Especially with this bunch of songs, which feel like a lot of different stories in one audio film, capturing all the things we were feeling at the time.”

The Unloved story really begins on 29 June 2011 in the Rotary Room in Santa Monica Boulevard's Little Temple bar. Inside this small, dark, orangey space, Ciancia and Vincent ran a club night where some of the great musicians in town would come out and play for what's been described as a modern-day Wrecking Crew. Wayne Kramer, Jim Keltner, Deantoni Parks, Gus Seyffert and many others would create their own version of musical heaven in a well-coordinated jam space.

"I chose this Airbnb because of the beautiful memories we had of the Rotary Room, which was just down the street," says Vincent. "It was a music salon – a place where all our buddies could get together and play. There'd be a little bit of direction, in the sense that there was a theme and somebody would be curating for the night."

Since Vincent and Ciancia left LA for adventure before they settled down in France, much has changed in their old East Hollywood neighbourhood, and the Little Temple bar is no longer open. They still have fond memories of the music created there, which Ciancia remembers not as a place for virtuosity of the worst kind.

"I mean, you could noodle if you wanted to, but it was like, 'Hey, this isn't a masturbation sort of thing'."

On that particular June evening, Holmes had been invited to curate an event at the club by Ciancia – who he'd met when he was hired to play keyboards on a Soderbergh soundtrack – bringing along artists such as Money Mark, Benji Hughes and Gaby Moreno.

Significantly, Holmes' DJ set included old nuggets and rare gems like Ram And Sel's 'Screw You' from 1970. Immediately captivated by Vincent's melancholy vocals, he suggested to Ciancia that they should try something together. Many of the Rotary Room's musical stalwarts would eventually pack into the nearby legendary Electro-Vox Recording Studios to help commit Unloved's debut album to tape. Released in 2016, 'Guilty Of Love' took angsty girl-group pop and brought it into the 21st century, sung by grown-ups.

"Vox is gone now, too," laments Ciancia. "But the memories are still strong."

The owner of Electro-Vox, the award-winning video game and film composer Woody Jackson (best known for his work on 'Red Dead Redemption'), sold the building a couple of years ago and moved to Tucson, Arizona. He took the studio and its celebrated collection of vintage equipment with him.

"There were the drums from the TV series 'Kung Fu'," says Ciancia. "And a guitar that was played on the 'M*A*S*H' theme. It was our favourite studio, and there's such a giant pot of artists here in LA who are just ready to go. It had such history. There was a feeling in there, a vibe that – without wanting to sound corny – 'this is where magic happens'."

Old Hollywood is disappearing, Vox Studios is now nearly 500 miles away, and everyone connected with the band has relocated to Europe, although the decadent spirit of Hollywood lives on in Unloved – boosted by new adventures.

"We made the choice to leave before the mess started," says Vincent, referring to the pandemic. "We decided it was time to go, so we sold our house and started to travel around. It wasn't for any reason other than wanting a change of scenery."

To begin with, she and Ciancia spent several months as guests of Holmes in Belfast, where they worked on Unloved's second long-player, 2019's 'Heartbreak'. More enjoyably synthy than their debut, especially on tracks like 'Boy And Girl' and 'If', it gave some indication of the progression to come.

Another track, 'Remember', features Etienne Daho, and he's back again on the 'The Pink Album', sing-speaking surreptitiously in French on the spooky 'Love Experiment'. When I spoke to Daho for Electronic Sound in 2018, he jokingly mentioned he'd been stalking Unloved, such is his affection for the band. Ciancia and Vincent, it turns out, feel much the same way about him.

"It was instantaneous," recalls Vincent of her meeting with the singer. "It felt like we were connected somehow."

"Eventually, Jade and I ended up working with Étienne, and he was so kind," says Ciancia. "He knew we were bouncing around, and he helped us to get an artist's visa in France."

Ciancia and Vincent also appear on two songs on Daho's excellent 2017 album 'Blitz'. They now find themselves back in Los Angeles at the behest of their friend, because back in 2004, the pair released a self-titled avant hip hop CD as Vincent & Mr Green on Mike Patton's Ipecac label, and Daho has fallen in love with one of the songs on it. He's decided to cover it on his forthcoming record, and nothing short of the original tape will do, so Ciancia and Vincent have made the transatlantic trek to "deep-dive into the reels" in their last remaining storage unit.

"It's all on two-inch tape, and it's a reminder of the technology," says Ciancia. "I have two giant buckets full of tapes and hard drives, and each one has a different power source. I found a guy from Wales in town and he's doing the transfers right now."

With Holmes and Daho such an integral part of the set-up, Unloved are like an extended family.

Ciancia and Vincent's daughter, Raven Violet (who recently collaborated with Holmes on four tracks for his next solo record), is also a contributor to 'The Pink Album'. It's not the first time she has sung with Unloved, either – she's often credited as a backing vocalist and supplied lead vocals on 2020's 'Strange Effect' single.

As well as Jarvis Cocker, Jon "Blues Explosion" Spencer makes an appearance on the new album, and their masculine seediness becomes the perfect foil for the girls.

"They fit right into the Unloved universe," says Holmes.

PHOTO: DELPHINE GHOSAROSSIAN

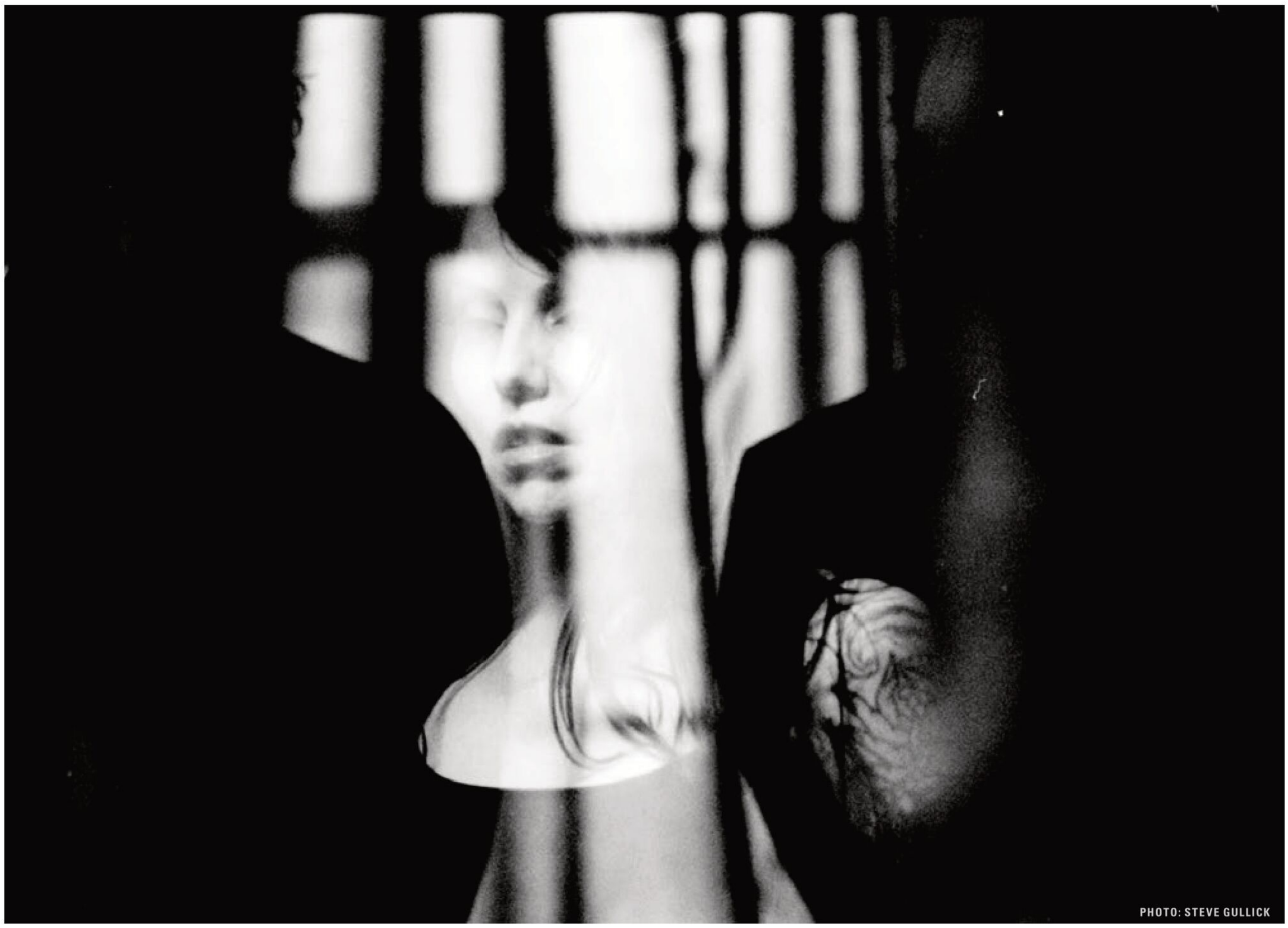


PHOTO: STEVE GULLICK

'S trange Effect' has had around four million streams on Spotify, thanks to its inclusion in the BBC's hit series, 'Killing Eve'. We are not avoiding Villanelle here, but the symbiotic relationship between Unloved and 'Killing Eve' has already been explored extensively. A road less travelled, though, is David Holmes' recent foray into psychedelic-assisted therapy and how it has manifested in his work. He claims his productivity has increased since he undertook self-medication by microdosing, and that it's been further augmented by the hiatus of the last few years.

"Well, that's what happens when you have a pandemic," he says. "There was fuck all else to do, and I just kept telling myself I was in the best prison in the world."

On the new record, Holmes has been able to write lyrics for Unloved for the first time and has even contributed his first solo composition in 'Turn Of The Screw', which is sung by Raven Violet. Normally, he and Ciancia will bounce files between Saint-Malo and Belfast, and then everyone will meet up, either in Holmes' Belfast studio or in one he's currently building in Provence.

So, is the "screw you" refrain in 'Turn Of The Screw' a nod to the Ram And Sel single? And did it subliminally play a part in influencing the band's bubblegum pop aesthetic?

"Yeah, that sort of did inadvertently become an influence on 'Turn Of The Screw'," says Holmes. "But when I started putting all the lyrics together, it became a very different sort of 'screw' in a sense, because the song is about mental health. Basically, it's about diving into the world of psilocybin, DMT and LSD as a form of medicine, rather than taking them with your friends and pissing yourself laughing."

When he moved back to Belfast full-time in 2012, Holmes found himself working through some historic trauma related to growing up as a child of the Troubles in the 1970s and 1980s. His approach to self-healing has also been advocated by artists like James' Tim Booth and Liars' Angus Andrew, and he has been guided by the books of Michael Pollan and podcasts from American mycologist Paul Stamets. More than anything, though, psychedelic therapy has opened up new portals of creativity.

Six years ago, Holmes was diagnosed with Pure O, a form of OCD which makes him "obsessed with everything I've ever been into". He now attributes his vast record collection and eclectic tastes at least in part to his condition, which has proven to be an asset for a project as broad-ranging as Unloved.

"It's led to me scouring every fucking bargain bin, Oxfam shop, market and record store," he admits. "I've always had a real obsession with records."

'The Pink Album' is just the start of this new phase of productivity. 'Polychrome', an album featuring a further eight tracks, is slated for release later this year, with the promise of more material in 2023. It's a fantastic time to be a fan of the band, with songs as powerful and moving as 'Number In My Phone' – perhaps Unloved's finest moment to date – which, with its descending basslines and haunting choral motifs, has an almost French baroque feel.

"The song is an ode to my mother, who died," reveals Jade Vincent. "David actually said that line about having the 'number in my phone' and it all made sense. He lost someone, I lost someone, and we were listening to those messages we had on our phones. I cried singing it, and I'm thinking about it now and it's moving me to tears. It was a very important song for all of us.

"And it was really magic the way it happened. The song came together in a beautiful way – and real fast. Keefus had the mic set up, Raven and the cat were there, and it just caught fire. It doesn't always happen that way, but that day it did."

'The Pink Album' is out now on Heavenly Recordings

FUSION PROFUSION

Friskily mashing up lush electronica, post-dubstep, balladry, breaks and beats, Jockstrap's Georgia Ellery and Taylor Skye offer up a proper melting pot of sonic delights. Meet the breakout stars of wonky art-pop...

WORDS: STEPHEN DALTON
PICTURES: EDDIE WHELAN

"Growing up, I always wanted to be a pop star," muses Georgia Ellery of deliciously oddball electro-folk/art-punk pair, Jockstrap. "A pop star or a hairdresser..."

Three days after their casually magnificent appearance at Bluedot 2022, a playful riot of vividly original avant-pop, melting orchestral glitchcore, thunderous left-field techno, circuit-bending punktronica, achingly melodic chansons and seductively mellow lounge jazz, Ellery and her fellow Jockstrapper Taylor Skye are speaking via video call. These mid-20s kids seem disarmingly soft-spoken, fresh-faced and polite for the makers of such diabolically inventive, subversively sexy, reality-rupturing music. They barely look old enough to convincingly order half a shandy in a village pub.

There is no such thing as a typical Jockstrap song, but most of their tracks so far sound like three or four mutually antagonistic sonic ideas all fighting for supremacy. 'Concrete Over Water', a breathy reverie about the bittersweet joys of city living, becomes a tumultuous trip hop mash-up of fizzing synths and desiccated vocal effects. On the anthemic '50/50', stampeding acid techno meets jabbering Dadaist chants and woozy sighs. And their self-remixed 'I Want Another Affair' is an airy bossa nova shimmy that morphs into a blasting Italo-house banger overlaid with disembodied raps and samples.

Their debut album, 'I Love You Jennifer B', just released, offers a wide-ranging panorama of softly strummed folk-pop ballads, throbbing hi-NRG beats, plucked harps, melting electroscapes, autotuned voices and super-saturated hyper-pop melodies. Think Squarepusher, Joanna Newsom and Burt Bacharach to a disco beat.

In Jockstrap's music, the ground is constantly shifting, with tempo and texture dissolving as the mood lurches between euphoria and nausea, romance and horror. All that is solid melts into air. Skye admits this "pushing and pulling" between sweet and soft to dark and dissonant is a deliberate strategy, mirroring his own emotional state.

"Yeah, I like that in music," he says, nodding. "Often – in my life at least – something can go from feeling great to feeling horrific within seconds, so when moments like that happen in the music, it's because it feels relatively familiar... ha! It's all driven by emotion, really."

The time-stretching, sense-jarring, voice-reversing glitch elements in Jockstrap come from Skye, who prods and tweaks a range of electronic gizmos onstage while Ellery plays violin and sings.

"All of the manipulation is done on a computer," Skye explains. "It's very specific – I don't do the same thing for every song. Sometimes it's about making the full song and then messing about with it, and sometimes it's about changing a certain sound. Usually, it's quite rudimentary, but done in an extreme way."

Meanwhile, Ellery provides Jockstrap with sweetly fragrant melodies, fabulous outfits and confessional lyrics full of lust, heartbreak and love/hate sentiments towards urban living, echoing her real divided loyalties as a native of Cornwall now based in London.

"Most of it is autobiographical," she concedes. "I can't really make anything up. I have tried, but that initial spark... I can't get it from fiction. So if nothing's happening in my life, it's a dry spell for the music."

Ellery also directs or co-directs Jockstrap's stylish, surreal, funny videos, smartly giving the band's visual identity the same strong authorial voice as their sound.

"It's been pretty much our idea, steering the ship," she smiles. "I'll keep doing it until we can afford the best director in the world."

Even if Ellery and Skye sometimes sound like they're playing in different bands, they insist any creative tension between them is more asset than liability. While some groups split up over musical differences, Jockstrap are staying together for the same reason.

"We're quite good at working through songs, even if we hit walls, which is not a skill everyone has," Ellery explains. "When we disagree on something, we find an alternative that we're both up for. It has to be that way rather than someone feeling unhappy about a decision, which would lead us to a different place. But it's important to have the tension for release when you're working with someone else. You've got to be able to say, 'No, I disagree – we should try something else'. Because if there was none of that, it would just be like fluff, wouldn't it?"

Both members of Jockstrap come from musical families. Born and raised in London before moving to the sleepy East Midlands town of Market Harborough at the age of 11, Skye was brought up by parents who had enjoyed successful careers as West End musical regulars.

"They both sing and play instruments, although they teach now," he says. "My dad plays the piano, so I started that very young. And they are huge music fans – they introduced me to everything I listen to, basically. But they're into much weirder stuff than Jockstrap. This is not really pushing it for them."

Ellery's childhood musical passions were composers such as Tchaikovsky and Brahms, having been encouraged to learn violin from the age of five by her music therapist mother.

"I guess it paid off in the end," she laughs. "She's our number-one fan, along with Taylor's parents."

But when the teenage Ellery began partying at weekend-long "barn raves" in her native Penzance, she swapped classical strings for house beats and dubstep basslines, and it was a shared love of dance music that helped to shape both future members of Jockstrap.

"One of the big influences for us as teenagers was UK dance music," she affirms. "That and the production on early Beyoncé. It was stuff that we both loved at the same time, and although we never channelled it on our first two EPs, I think we have done a bit with this album."

The pair first met in 2016 while they were studying at London's highly prestigious Guildhall School of Music and Drama – a launchpad for countless stellar talents, ranging from Noël Coward and George Martin to Mica Levi and Shabaka Hutchings.

Ellery was studying jazz and composing her own singer-songwriter material on the side. Skye was doing an electronic music course, light years removed from Ellery, but they shared some overlap in taste, including James Blake. They also shared a composition class and a student residence. After Skye posted some of his early productions on Facebook, Ellery tracked him down, and they began exchanging demos. They then made the inspired decision to try meshing their chalk-and-cheese styles together, proving Paula Abdul's evergreen adage that opposites attract.

"It made perfect sense to start making music with him," Ellery says.

Even though Guildhall once had a reputation for looking down on pop with snobbish disdain, Skye found the college an open-minded and inspiring place for experimental electronic composers.

"The intake for electronic music was very small – there were only about five or six students studying it in my year, and they ranged in style," he says. "Some made Pixies-like rock, some made Avicii-style dance and others made John Cage experimental music. I think because Guildhall has other courses that are slightly more abstract, it attracts quite open-minded people."

As Jockstrap began to take shape, Ellery also started playing the violin in various folk, klezmer and art-rock bands, including the Guildhall-affiliated Black Country, New Road. She remains a member of both groups, although she now has a stand-in violinist to cover for BCNR, who have blossomed into critical favourites. Back then, though, she found the college had little interest in her extracurricular musical ambitions.

"They didn't care too much about our side projects," she says. "That kind of made me think, 'Why am I putting all my eggs in the Guildhall basket?'. But my songwriting was definitely influenced by what I learned. Before Guildhall, I wrote more by ear, but I was then able to intellectualise songwriting, so that was another tool to write with."

Although Jockstrap always had co-founders Ellery and Skye at their core, their embryonic line-up was a five-piece featuring fellow Guildhall students Melchior Giedroyc, Michael Dunlop and Lewis Evans.

"It took lots of rehearsal to get it tight," Ellery recalls. "We performed with some amazing players, but it was too unstable to tour and we weren't earning enough money, so we ended up stripping Jockstrap back to a duo."

Shortly after completing their studies, Jockstrap released their debut EP, 'Love Is The Key To The City', on tiny boutique label Kaya Kaya. This landed them a deal with Warp in 2020, which led to two more EPs and a handful of singles. On paper, the fabled experimental electronic label should have been their natural home, but the duo have since signed with veteran indie powerhouse Rough Trade, partly because their friends Black Midi are on the same label.

"The Warp deal was just a short-term thing," Skye says. "We didn't have any big ideas about labels – we were feeling things out. The release went really well with Warp but then we had to figure out what to do next. Industry stuff. And Rough Trade were very excited about the project."

After a run of releases foregrounding their glitchy, discordant, disruptive side, Jockstrap's inaugural long-player covers a broader musical spectrum, giving full vent to the pair's passion for dancefloor anthems and vintage soft rock melodies.

"We wanted to have a mix of dance tracks, classic songs and more experimental stuff because that's what we're both interested in," Ellery explains. "And we had the opportunity to show a whole range of things on an album."

Jockstrap are that rare beast, a cutting-edge electro duo who – like Squarepusher or SOPHIE, Max Tundra or Hudson Mohawke – appreciate the syrupy, mesmerising, almost occult power of melodic soft rock. They readily cite Elton John and Paul Simon as key inspirations with no hint of irony.

"They are both huge influences, so we're happy to sound a bit like them," Skye enthuses, and when he admits that his dream collaborators would be pastel-shaded emo-pop lightweights Keane, Ellery sniggers, but he insists he is being sincere.

"I grew up listening to Jamie Cullum, James Morrison, Keane and Daniel Merriweather," he shrugs. "Someone like Keane would be really fun to work with. They're quite theatrical, and they've gone on to write stuff for theatre. It's obviously completely different to what we do, but I think we like to work with people who are in a completely different world to us."

So who is the mysterious woman who inspired the album title, 'I Love You Jennifer B'? It turns out she visited Ellery and Skye in their dreams on the same night. Yes, both of them.

"She's someone who we happened to dream of one night last year," Skye reveals. "We both woke and said, 'Did you have this dream?'. And we had, so it came from that."

They may share close creative chemistry, but Ellery assures me that they're not in the habit of having the same dreams.

"Not really," she grins. "But we thought this was such a strange thing to happen that we couldn't ignore it."

With a buzzy debut album, an upcoming US tour and an exploding media profile, Jockstrap seem poised on the cusp of moving up from hipster darlings to mainstream contenders. Ellery may yet end up being the proper pop star she always dreamed of being. Which would be a sad loss to hairdressing, of course, but a big win for subversively sexy, delightfully wonky music.

"We just want the music to reach as many people as possible while doing what we want to do," says Skye, laughing gently as he mumbles a cautionary warning to himself about talking bullshit.

"We're at the bottom of the pop star mountain, looking up at the peak," Ellery beams. "We can see it there. All we have to do is climb it."

'I Love You Jennifer B' is out now on Rough Trade

NEW BEAT

NEU!
50!
GRÖNLAND

In the 1970s, Brian Eno declared Klaus Dinger one of the greatest drummers in the world, alongside Clyde Stubblefield and Tony Allen. The sound of Neu!, augmented by the left-field guitar playing of Michael Rother, infused the music of Joy Division and David Bowie, and later the Dingerbeat was detectable in the work of artists like Stereolab – though Neu! were a band that changed the musical landscape by stealth.

This new deluxe boxset marks 50 years since they released their seminal, eponymous debut, and boasts the first three albums (the CD set also includes 'Neu! '86', originally released as 'Neu! 4' in 1995), plus a 'Tribute' album replete with remixes and new pieces inspired by the band, featuring New Order's Stephen Morris, Hot Chip's Alexis Taylor, The National, Mogwai and Idles. The influence Neu! had on modern alternative rock music is unquestionable, though it's worth remembering that their ascent to godlike status was anything but straightforward.

It was Klaus Dinger's La Düsseldorf, a band carved in the image of Neu!, who achieved international recognition first in 1976 with a little help from their shared producer, Conny Plank. 'Silver Cloud' was a huge hit in Germany and would later alert bands such as Ultravox and OMD to the commercial possibilities of synthesisers (and not just on novelty records). It's also worth remembering that Neu!'s back catalogue was in disarray a little more than two decades ago because of infighting.

The relationship between prinicipal members Rother and Dinger was tempestuous at best, and by the late 90s a legal wrangle held their collective catalogue – which had been out of print for a quarter of a century – in limbo. Before the days of streaming, sub-par quality bootleg editions were all that could be acquired. That scarcity might have added to Neu!'s mystique, though they were in danger of not capitalising on the goodwill imbued by Julian Cope's superlative 'Krautrocksampler' book, published in 1995. Thankfully, an agreement was hammered out, and the albums appeared again in CD format in 2001.

Fast-forward 21 years – and 14 years after the death of Klaus Dinger – and all of the stops have been pulled out here to give the band the package they truly deserve. These are albums that you probably know well already, but when brought together in one set, with the side-helping of tributes, it brings new ways of seeing.

It's hard to imagine now just what a profound effect 'Hallogallo' would have had on the select group of listeners who heard it in 1972. It must have been a sonic tabula rasa, of sorts – a new beginning – and also a palate cleanser from too much Anglo-American guitar machismo and a surfeit of German Schlager. It's propulsive driving music, but not the kind you'd find on a cheesy compilation. It's repetitive too, but all too human to be mechanical. 'Neu!' is as much a manifesto as it is an album.

As is the case with nearly all manifestos, total adherence is nigh-on impossible. 'Für Immer' gives the impression that, stylistically, it's business as usual on 'Neu! 2', though the band famously ran out of money and were forced to cut corners, speeding up and slowing down tracks in a bevy of experimentation to fill a Side Two-shaped hole. Like Lou Reed's 'Metal Machine Music', it's an album that divides people.

'Neu! '75' begins with the luminescent 'Isi' – surely the blueprint for La Düsseldorf – though a fissure emerges and the volcano erupts on Side Two, as Klaus Dinger brings in his brother Thomas and percussionist Hans Lampe, before stealing the guitar and indulging himself in some proto-punk angst, barking and slurring into a mic (no doubt losing the other Mike at this point). In many ways, 'Neu! '75' is the most entertaining Neu! album of all.

And so to 'Tribute', which is unusual for a tribute album in that you'll want to keep replaying it. The abstract nature of Neu! leaves plenty of room for interpretation, and it works a treat here, from the dancefloor majesty of 'Hallogallo' – remixed by Stephen Morris and Gabe Gurnsey – to the surprising 'Zum Herz', a breezy, Neu!-inspired punk-pop manifestation by American rockers Guerilla Toss. Yann Tiersen, who is finding his way in the electronic world with increasing assurance, takes 'Lieber Honig' on a journey to someplace new and intriguing, while Idles – a band ordinarily more Oi! than Neu! – fair reasonably well without all those clunking consonants to fall over on their noise-imbued reworking of 'Negativland'.

These new versions understand the nuances of Neu!, where motorik urgency can induce long periods of meditative contemplation. And five decades after Eno made his declaration, it's strange to think that those three influential drummers he cited – sadly no longer with us, of course – are still the standard-bearers. The Dingerbeat goes on.

JEREMY ALLEN

NEU!

MARXIST LOVE DISCO ENSEMBLE

MLDE

MR BONGO

This irresistible slice of fresh, attitude-laden energy aims to dispel the misconception that disco is throwaway, and that politically informed musical leftism is too earnest. And boy, does this Italian, Slovenian and Croatian collective succeed in its goal. Led by Bologna percussionist Paolo Volkov, 'MLDE' merges the nostalgic sounds of 1970s eurodisco and 80s synths into a giddy mix, especially on the slick grooves of 'Dust' or the pop-savvy 'Manifesto'. With such pulsating floorfillers, the class struggle feels properly joyous. **CG**

THE ROWAN AMBER MILL

Through Dark Polished Glass

MILLER SOUNDS

The trauma of the English Civil War as viewed through the "scrying glass" of Elizabethan occultist Dr John Dee? Go on, then. Since 2007, Devon-based Stephen Stannard has been a prolific producer of "woodland folkadelica", and here he conjures up that difficult eighth album. "The devil found no work for me / Though my idle hands were plain to see," he sings on 'The Ballad Of The Witchfinder General', his voice a whisper amid forests of lilting synths. Those hands may not be tilling the fields, but this is still a welcome addition to an impressively atmospheric body of work. **BF**

HASHBROWN

On The Sidewalk

ICS LIBRARY

Hashbrown's 'On The Sidewalk' beat tape lands on Philippines-based label ICS Library in sample-slamming, rhythm-blurring fashion, like the best bits of Prince and George Clinton mashed up and spliced. With its 80s home workout vibe and radiant, Paradise Garage energy, 'Autobody' punches the dancing buttons hard, while 'Lift Me Off The Ground' is the very essence of finely tuned mayhem. One of the quirkiest albums of the summer, this just oozes originality and fun, whether you're under the sun or poised beneath a disco ball. **FH**

UNLOVED

The Pink Album

HEAVENLY

Unloved have always been cinematic, though they've somehow augmented the widescreen and turned up the drama here. 'The Pink Album' is a 22-song bonanza featuring collaborators such as Jarvis Cocker, Étienne Daho and Jon Spencer, but while they might get the headlines, Jade Vincent's deliciously rich and smoky voice is the glue that holds it all together. The David Holmes-instigated 'Waiting For Tomorrow' and 'Turn Of The Screw' have an insouciant, anarchic playfulness, but the pièce de résistance is the haunting 'Number In My Phone', a song about grief with a French chamber-pop feel. Glorious. **JA**

GRANDAMME
Holy Mountain
DEF PRESSÉ

East London duo Grandamme (aka Bastien Keb and Claudia Kane) turn in a cracking dreampop debut here. The Alejandro Jodorowsky-referencing title track features an intricate tapestry of plucked instruments, complemented by Kane's sultry vocal and a gossamer covering of strings, while 'Deep Dark Sky' swaggers gently, delicately upheld by some slippery double bass and garnished with gorgeous plinky xylophone. Hazy and exquisite, 'Holy Mountain' is accomplished and sensual, with enough dexterous forays into soul, jazz and electronica to keep the listener alert. **JA**

PADDY MULCAHY
Angel's Share
XXIM

On 'Angel's Share', Irish musician Paddy Mulcahy's fourth album, tracks such as 'A Smile On The Left' and 'Thomas Street' deploy recognisably minimal post-classical/electronic arrangements. On '3rd Wave', Steve Reich-style synths expand into a wide landscape of drama and colour. But the record is at its most poignant and effective when these complex patterns recede into simpler forms, as on 'What A Leaf Hears', which recalls The Haxan Cloak's Bobby Krlic at his taut, melancholic best. **ST**

MINIMAL SCHLAGER
Love, Sex & Dreams
DUCHESS BOX

London/Berlin siblings Alicia Macanás and Fran Parisi drop their first album as Minimal Schlager, with a crepuscular take on Chromatics-style Italo-disco and synthpop. It's inspired by the brutality and passion of Spanish dramatist Federico García Lorca's 'Blood Wedding' tragedy, as Macanás' breathy, half-spoken vocals on 'Forbidden Fruit' and 'Euphoria' evoke "dive club" atmospherics and the subterranean temptations that might lead us dangerously astray. Excellent. **CG**

LYZZA
MOSQUITO
BIG DADA

Having cut her touring teeth as long-time support to the wonderfully deviant Mykki Blanco, it's not surprising to discover Brazilian-born, Amsterdam-based Lyzza has also carved out a distinct niche for herself in left-field songsmithery. That said, this first album does contain moments that are pure pop, like Portuguese-voiced anthem 'Ressaca'. Elsewhere, on tracks such as 'Deserve It' (featuring Spanish trap artist La Zowi) or 'Lucky You', her productions are both original and catchy, full of attitude and hugely compelling. **BW**

ONDNESS
Oeste A D
DISCREPANT

A heavy dose of tropical dyschronia from Portugal's Bruno Silva, aka Ondness. Opening track 'Torres E Baldios' fuses ancient panpipes with futuristic electronics to create a disorientating sense of time being (enjoyably) out of joint. The album ends with the Eastern chimes and backwards reverb of 'Endless Domingo', its low-key exotica and sci-fi strangeness recalling the outer-world sonics of Chilean experimentalists Archimboldos and Embassador Dulgoon, but pushed to a most unsettling zenith. **ST**

MIKE DICKINSON
Four
BANDCAMP

A mischievous electronic sprite lurking in secluded pockets of Teesside woodland, Dickinson laces his retro-synth nuggets with both puckish humour and vague disquiet. 'This Isn't My First Temporal Anomaly' is delightfully Orb-like, and 'Solo' needs only a glottal Morten Harket vocal to become a 'Now'-friendly 1980s chart banger. But there's grit too. 'Wreckage' is spookily fractured ambience, and the sinister swirls of 'One Giant Leap' suggest a tragic end to the ambitious Middlesbrough space programme. Another charming missive from this self-effacing little genius. **BF**

SUDAN ARCHIVES
Natural Brown Prom Queen
STONES THROW

Luxuriously generous at almost an hour in length, Sudan Archives' second album is laden with the addictive hooks, dreamlike strings and frenetic beats for which LA-based vocalist/violinist Brittney Parks is perhaps best known. The record serves as a richly textural, lyrically adept exploration of Parks' expansive catalogue of influences, and traverses cosmic jazz, synthpop, R&B, hip hop and more. Highlights include the scrappy, Cardi B-esque 'OMG BRITT', and 'Ciara', a joyful, ethereal diss track. **CC**

JEIGO
Cerulean
AIR MILES

Producer Jack Carr Miles has been a regular face around the London scene over the last few years, both as a DJ and maker of cracking 12-inch breaks and garage cuts. Following the release of various singles and EPs, this inaugural album has a much deeper and more varied resonance, as woozy, beatless opener 'Hey Child' and the Autechre-ish hyperactivity of 'Overwhelmer' (featuring Tom VR) give floorfillers such as the throbbing '18 03 95 Brock & Groove' space to shine. Plenty of infectious energy, with emotion to match. **BW**

IAN WILLIAM CRAIG
Music For Magnesium_173
FATCAT

What do you get when you combine "an elegant puzzle game inspired by quantum mechanics" with the synthesised warbling of a classically trained opera singer? The soundtrack to the PC game 'Magnesium_173' – a wonderfully lush set of pieces richly layered by Vancouver-based composer Ian William Craig. Ambient? Mostly. But as a standout track like 'Prisms' demonstrates, there's also a cosmic tranquility here that should help offset the sound of your brain seizing up, as you get lost in whatever the hell is taking placing onscreen. **JS**

DIALOG
Dialog
ASTRAL INDUSTRIES

The London-based Astral Industries label is home to some of the deepest modern ambient music, and this latest release is another heady delight. A collaboration between the Netherlands' Samuel Van Dijk and Finland's Rasmus Hedlund, 'Dialog' finds the electronic producers merging minds over four long-form tracks. 'Side A' is all dubby synth pads, but by 'Side C' they've abandoned structure, and float freely in seas of shimmering effects, soft drones and "ethereal dimensions". Hypnotic and brilliant. **BM**

ANDY FOSBERRY
Night Skies
SPUN OUT OF CONTROL

Steven Spielberg's abandoned sequel to 'Close Encounters Of The Third Kind' was surprisingly dark, and sci-fi nut Fosberry has used leaked script fragments to inspire this splendidly bombastic soundtrack. 'Watch The Skies' sets the tone, with the warning bleeps of some godforsaken radar station accompanied by head-pounding beats. And while 'The Light From The Orchard' is gently unsettling, the overall mood is outright terror, with the discordant clangs of 'Faces At The Window' enough to make Richard Dreyfuss choke on his mashed potato. **BF**

ELIF YALVAÇ
Green Drift
EXPERT SLEEPERS

When trees rustle in the wind, do they sound like modular synthesisers? Turkish composer Elif Yalvaç ponders this question on 'Green Drift', her quietly moving follow-up to 2020's 'Mountains Become Stepping Stones'. With Expert Sleepers' Andrew Ostler, Yalvaç initially recorded these tracks as live improvisations with bass clarinets, guitars and modular synth. The droning 'Morningside' is undulating and hypnotic, while at the other end of the scale, 'Green Cathedral' conveys an urgency that reflects the increasing precariousness of the natural world. **CF**

O-SHIN

II / ∞

GALAXY CAT

There's a mesmeric, love-it-or-hate-it quality to Stefanie De Beurs' voice on her first album as O-SHiN. Her quirky, childlike vocal lights up the chilled beats of 'Losing My Nature', winding up somewhere in Smoke City's 'Underwater Love' territory. In other places, 'II / ∞' ('Second Of Infinity') strikes a similar tone to electropop experimentalists like Lykke Li, but with deliberately less polish. It's all pleasingly peculiar and strangely addictive, making the Berlin-based O-SHiN a name to keep an eye on. **CF**

PALE BLUE EYES

Souvenirs

FULL TIME HOBBY

This Devon trio have strong links to Sheffield – not least, their association with synth maestro and producer Dean Honer, whose mix gives their debut long-player, 'Souvenirs', a delightful modernist glow. There's a sense of constant forward motion here, part motorik pop, part shoegaze sugar rush. The opener, 'Globe', is full of sweeping New Order-esque thrust, all dancing keys and understated vocals. Last year's radio hit 'TV Flicker' has a nice wobbly theremin hook, but the best track is the China Crisis-like 'Dr Pong', a jolly earworm about table tennis and the joys of an endless summer. **JB**

NUG

Napping Under God

3XL

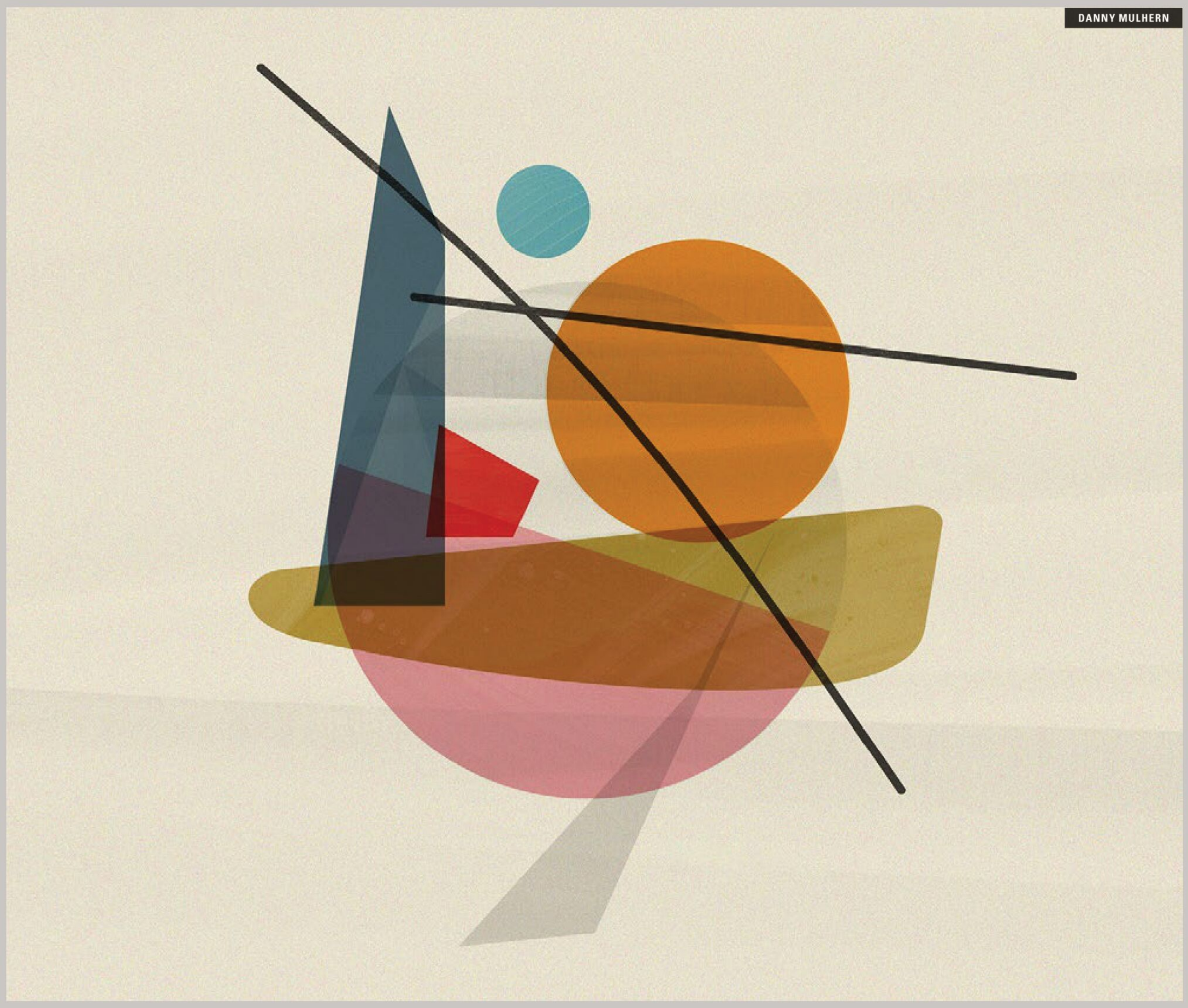
As 'NUG', German therapeutic-ambient sound artist Florian TM Zeisig and Canadian producer PVAS blend their combined strengths into the smokiest of breaky cuts for Berlin label 3XL (aka Experiences Ltd). Each track raises the slow club music torch higher, from the shimmering dancefloor-bound textures of 'Morpheus' to the minimalist, high-tension vibe of 'Is Under Blanket'. 'Napping Under God' exudes more of those edgy, clubby vibes, occupying a quirky yet satisfyingly niche corner of its own. **FH**

HOLMES + ATTEN ASH

Saturnian

BLACKFORD HILL

Holmes + atten Ash are Edinburgh and Bristol musicians Simon Holmes and Paul Nash. The 13 electro-choral tracks on their cleverly titled debut were principally inspired by Saturn's moons, but also by the human devastation of our own planet. The soft background textures and gently unfolding melodies of 'Daphnis' carry an inquisitiveness and beguiling sense of vast, unknowable mystery, while 'Phoebe' centres itself in nature through birdsong samples, its tentative synth pulse sounding like a damaged broadcast from a ruined Earth. Ruminative and thought-provoking. **MS**



DANNY MULHERN
Singing Through Others
ENATE MUSIC

This fifth album by London composer, producer and multi-instrumentalist Danny Mulhern is inspired by relationships, and takes the form of a sometimes glitchy, often cinematic interplay of electronic soundscapes and string/brass/piano arrangements, continuing Mulhern's collaboration with the London Contemporary Orchestra. The title track, featuring writer and philosopher Nora Bateson, is a delicate, melting synchrony of the sonic and poetic. Much like the other pieces, it's unexpected and poignant – music that remembers closeness and senses distance. **CC**

AMETROM
Club Balkan
BOLSTRONICS

Ametrom is Canadian musician Dave Bolster, and 'Club Balkan', his fourth release under that moniker, picks up where the groove of 2021's 'Distant Reflections' left off. His music exudes a kind of hot nocturnal feel, like the sound of a sun-baked city stirring into life at dusk. Opening with 'Catania', his neon synth lines build into a suite of increasingly lush and louche loops, culminating with 'Wander Vogue' which sounds like a fetching distillation of Can's 'Ege Bamyasi'. Top stuff. **ST**

CHRISTINA VANTZOU, MICHAEL HARRISON, JOHN ALSO BENNETT
Christina Vantzou, Michael Harrison, John Also Bennett
SÉANCE CENTRE

"An observer, a pianist and a synthesist form a triangle," says their bio. (Or "walk into a bar"?) More accurately, Kranky artist Christina Vantzou moulds a set of raga exercises – performed by pianist Michael Harrison and electronically sweetened by John Also Bennett's subtle modular synth backdrop – into this group of profoundly meditative excursions. Pretty, and when it comes to extended moments like the 15-minute closing track 'Bageshri', thoroughly engaging. **JS**

DARKROOM
Fallout 4
EXPERT SLEEPERS

Expert Sleepers label boss and modular synth head Andrew Ostler returns to his Darkroom project with guitarist Michael Bearpark. Revisiting the UK duo's long-running 'Fallout' series for the first time in 20 years, this latest instalment features three long-form pieces derived from live recordings. Inspired by the improvisatory nature of Can and Tangerine Dream, it's a wandering, cosmic ambient trip, especially on 'It's Clear From The Air' – 15 minutes of magnetic, deep space exploration that definitely fulfils the brief. **CF**

GEMMA CULLINGFORD - PHOTO: MARK FRASER

GEMMA CULLINGFORD

Tongue Tied

ELMO RECORDINGS

Through multiple subversions of synthpop, mutant disco, acid house and the 1970s glam of standout track 'Red Room', Sink Ya Teeth's Gemma Cullingford has developed a confident and coherent voice that finds her moving far beyond the pensive confessionals of last year's solo debut, 'Let Me Speak'. The opener, 'Accessory', brings pounding beats, psychedelic guitar and whispered threats, 'Bass Face' and 'Chronicle Of Sound' both offer sneering 80s electro-funk, and 'No Fail' adds flourishes of Italo-disco to this spellbinding album. **MJ**

SKUDGE

Soundworks

SKUDGE

Swedish producer Elias Landberg has produced more 12-inch dance tools than you've had hot dinners, but for albums – this is his fourth – he's apparently after something that not only works in the blistering heat of the club, but also bears repeated listening. Minimal is the key word here. The landscapes are constantly shifting and refocusing, albeit subtly, meaning the likes of 'Cycle' and 'Scape' conjure vivid moods and atmospheres from the most modest sonic ingredients. **BW**

CLEARED

Of Endless Light

TOUCH

The latest album from Steven Hess and Michael Vallera exists in the darkened shadows of their Chicago base. An exercise in maximalist duration but easily missed minimalist detail, 'Of Endless Light' requires extreme volume to be fully appreciated. When heard this way, the otherwise quiet, grainy textures of the 18-minute opening track 'First Sleep' reveal an ever-shifting landscape of low, fluttering rumbles, overlapping metallic drone splinters, elegiac tones and deeply submerged rhythms. Dramatic, exquisitely layered and hugely absorbing. **MS**

ALTERED IMAGES

Mascara Streakz

COOKING VINYL

"I wake each morning wide / My face is on the slide." The opening couplet of the first Altered Images album in 38 years suggests a downbeat Clare Grogan, but fear not – she's still the People's Pop Princess, and the crisp production of husband (and 80s band member) Stephen Lironi is suitably shiny. For proof, try the glorious 'Glitter Ball', a paean to the uplifting power of pop. "The heartbeat of the songs that she hears in the glitter ball of life"? On this cracking album at least, it's pounding away with invigorating vitality. **BF**

MARSEN JULES
Herbstlaub
KEPLAR

The third album by electronic/ ambient German musician Marsen Jules (aka Martin Juhls), 'Herbstlaub' is perhaps his most astonishing work. Available again on vinyl for the first time since its original 2005 release, it's comprised of six melancholic pieces, each one reverberating around simple melodic patterns and beautifully gauzy textures. Tracks such as 'Fanes D'Automne' and 'Aurore' ripple and swell with emotion, charged with the potency and precision of Leyland Kirby or William Basinski at their most starkly affecting. Sublime. **ST**

POLLY SCATTERGOOD
Polly Scattergood
MUTE

Polly Scattergood's self-titled debut from 2009 only made it to 157 in the UK charts, though it stands as a testament to how great pop music could have been in the 1990s if people had only opened their ears. 'Other Too Endless' packs a gut-punching pathos that Alanis Morissette could only have dreamed of, while on 'Please Don't Touch' Scattergood sounds like a Cockney waif who's escaped from a musical. Produced by Simon Fisher Turner and Daniel Miller, it's a magical record, spirited but also melancholic, and it fully deserves to finally be available on vinyl. **JA**

DIENNE
Addio
OTHER PEOPLE

Belgian composer, singer and multi-instrumentalist Dienne arrives with an elegiac album dedicated to her late grandmother. It's a stunning sonic eulogy, combining oboe, flute and piano with vocals and futuristic soundscapes. On 'Felicitazioni', heavenly choirs collide with static and fuzzed-out samples, while 'Piccolo E Cattivo' and 'Casa Di Emma' layer oboe into distorted noise. This pairing of oboe and electronics is an inspired one, and 'Mio Signore' is an unmissable highlight, weaving the instrument into beautiful, deep synth chords and twisty effects. **CF**

JOCKSTRAP
I Love You Jennifer B
ROUGH TRADE

This astounding debut from London duo Georgia Ellery (Black Country, New Road) and Taylor Skye is a thing of wickedly surreal, esoteric beauty. Ellery fronts up, singing sweetly in an old-school jazz/folk lilt, while Skye tinkers and twiddles the knobs, chucking in orchestral flourishes and wonky disruptions at will. The infectious '50/50' builds into a playful, Aphex-meets-Squarepusher glitch-off, but discombobulating ballad 'Concrete Over Water' really penetrates, as squiggly electro and synthetic cut-ups impinge on Ellery's delicate phrasing – like Hudson Mohawke gatecrashing an afternoon tea party. Startlingly good. **VI**

GABE GURNSEY

Diablo

PHANTASY SOUND

Building on 2018's superlative 'Physical', Gabe Gurnsey's second album for Phantasy is an even mightier statement of intent. With his girlfriend Tilly Morris as muse and collaborator – she contributes lyrics and melodies, and sings on most of the tracks – the Manchester-based producer ramps up the synths and bass to deliver big, lustrous slabs of sound. Together, Gurnsey and Morris are quite the force.

Electro and Detroit techno vibes are channelled into pulsating, dancefloor-centric beats and rhythms, loaded with essential "minor-key sadness" – think Moroder, Eurythmics, Peaches. Very much an "edge of the city" record, every cut shimmers with that essential neon-lit, after-dark frisson, from the naggingly punchy 'Hey Diablo' to 'You Remind Me', which goes heavy on squelch and glitch. The whole thing throbs with desire and lustful energy. Sexy. Ravey. Total killer, all thriller.

"This is the kind of feeling I could ride forever," sings Morris yearningly on 'Push', which pretty much sums it up. Too much to say, too few words. Just buy it. **VI**

STEREOLAB

Pulse Of The Early Brain [Switched On Volume 5]

DUOPHONIC

Now five volumes deep into these retrospective odds and sods compilations, Stereolab prove once again that you need not put up with lousy YouTube rips or harvest a vital organ to revisit the dimmer corners of the band's discography.

'Pulse Of The Early Brain' moves across a spectrum that includes the band's 1992 'Low Fi' EP, limited edition wonders like 2008's 'Spool Of Collusion'/'Forensic Itch' single, and a mix of demos and live material. Highlights include the previously unreleased 'Robot Riot' and a pair of ace tracks – 'Simple Headphone Mind' and 'Trippin' With The Birds' – that hark back to their 1997 collaboration with Steven Stapleton's Nurse With Wound.

Completists with deep purses will have largely got here already, but the strength of these collections is that they feel exquisitely curated, bringing order to a catalogue that seemed blithely built by artists who just so happened to be collectors themselves. **JS**

KRISHNA GOINEAU

I Need A Slow

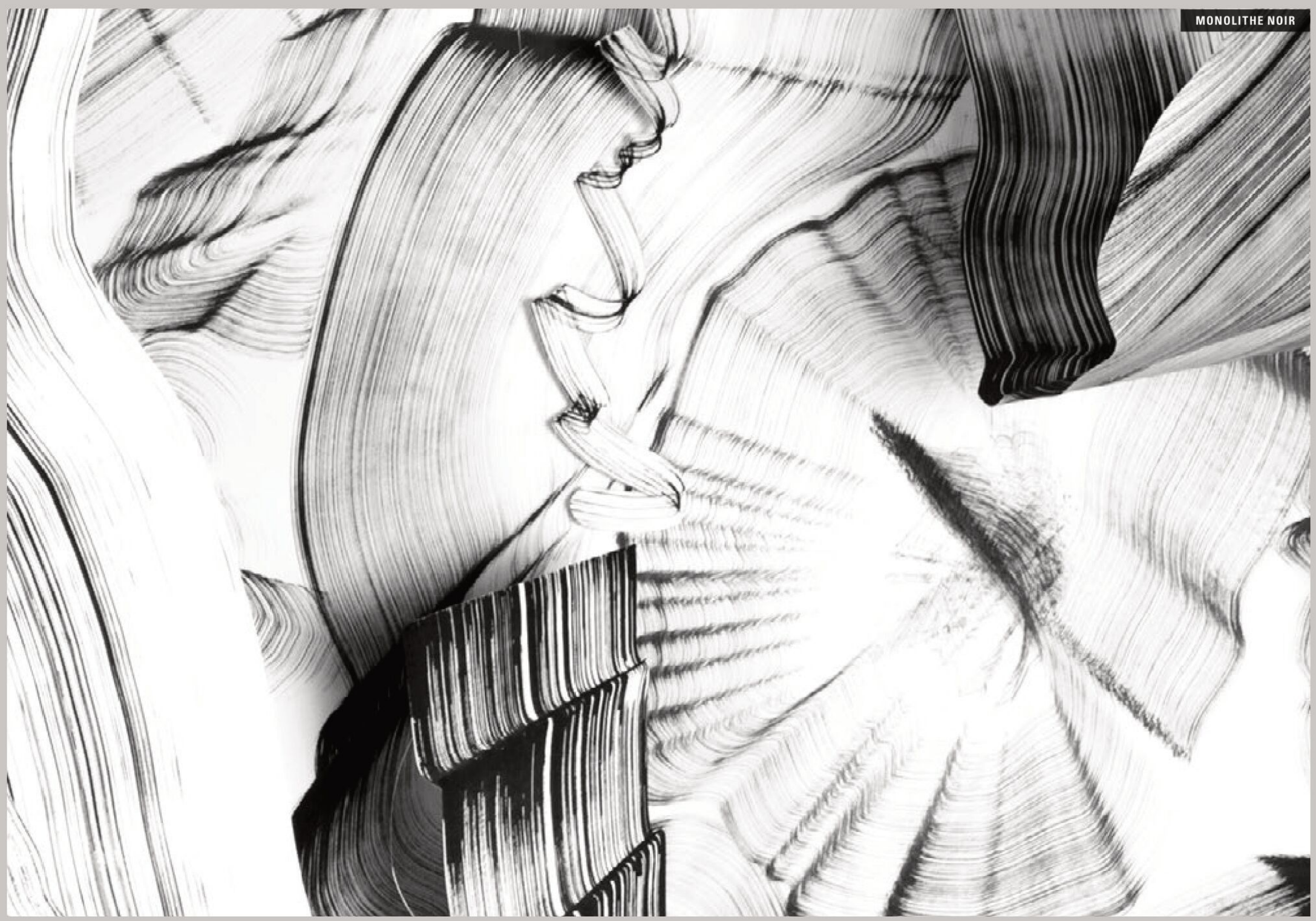
BUREAU B

Sri Lankan-born Krishna Goineau is perhaps best known for his membership of early 1980s industrial dance combo Liaisons Dangereuses, though these days he mainly spends his time painting in the South of France. But 15 years ago, Goineau produced a series of haunting home recordings that are finally seeing the light of day.

While still trading in intense electronic minimalism and ominous sprechgesang, there's something disorientating about these songs, like trying to negotiate the audio equivalent of an Escher house – a shadowy place with a trick floor, occasionally illuminated by arc-light flashes.

The hard, shifting beats and digital trills of 'Bérénice Orion' is Kraftwerk's 'Computer World' being fed through a shredder, the arrhythmic heartbeat of 'Nadar' feels very much like early Yello, and the spooky synthpop of 'Poison Machine' approaches Autechre levels of beat-doctoring.

With its buzzing linear drones, 'Fritz À Paris' is the straightest thing here, but the vocals are a stream of chopped-up, meaningless syllables, robbing them of – or maybe liberating them from – the power of communication. **JB**



MONOLITHE NOIR
Rin
CAPITANE

The third album from Brussels musician Antoine Pasqualini is a wonderfully quixotic and rhythmic exploration of, among other things, the Celtic peninsula we like to call Brittany. Idioms have been borrowed from the Brythonic tongue for titles ('Finvus', 'Askre', 'Balafenn', 'Brik'), while the album's name means "secret". There's certainly something hidden, furtive or clandestine about 'Rin', and the inscrutable Pasqualini always keeps us guessing, never revealing his true intent or spelling anything out.

Nevertheless, these are fascinating tracks to get lost in, and the way they were made is even more intriguing. 'Morse' jitters along with a taut energy, smothered with an old harmonium Pasqualini picked up at a flea market, while elsewhere he plays a hurdy-gurdy crafted from bits of scrap metal he found discarded in the street. 'Askre' seems to glower with a maleficent anger under its post-rock sheen, and sometimes you're reminded of Broadcast, at others you hear Faust. 'Rin' is fabulously disorientating, just like the best works of art should be. **JA**

JAZXING
Pearls Of The Baltic Sea
HIGHER LOVE

Jazxing are Gdańsk duo Jakub Sautycz and Mateusz Filipiuk, leading figures in their home city's – and Poland's – burgeoning nu-Balearic/electronic underground scene. Here, they pay due homage to Ibiza's 1990s golden era and the sort of eclectic cuts spun by José Padilla at one of his legendary Café Del Mar sets, or that ended up on Daniele Baldelli's seminal mixtapes.

And what a beautifully poised, nostalgic yet fresh tribute these tunes conjure. Right from the gently lapping electro-exotica of opening track, 'Fala', we're bathed in sunset warmth and light. Blazing standout 'W Uścisku' gets everything bang-on, its drifting sax, europop guitar reverb and driving downtempo beats fusing with the soaring yacht-rock vocals of Van Cyklop's Kamil Kozłowski, while elsewhere, new age sundown vistas rub up against space reggae grooves, as on the irresistible 'Harbor Dub'. Superb. **CG**

MARK PETERS
Red Sunset Dreams
SONIC CATHEDRAL

As someone who grew up in Wigan, Mark Peters' dreamy soundscapes resonate. On 2018's debut solo album, 'Innerland', he concocted a heady, sonic psychogeography, the sound of the town's bucolic edges smearing into industrial Merseyside and Manchester.

'Red Sunset Dreams' deploys a similar post-shoegaze drift, but rather than leading us through the landscape, it elevates us to soar high above. On 'Switch On The Sky', this widescreen scale is magnified by Dot Allison's ethereal vocals. 'Silver River' is laced with subtle pedal steel guitar – provided here by BJ Cole – a nod to Peters' love for country music. And end track 'Sundowning' recalls some of Peters' melancholic earlier work with Engineers. More than this though, the feel evokes the north-west's low rolling hills and coal-strewn valleys, as greens and greys contrast with moody orange skies.

However, rather than bittersweet regret, 'Red Sunset Dreams' projects these panoramas with a scale and romance that's more American West than English North. **ST**

HALINA RICE

Elision

INJAZERO

Multidisciplinary London artist Halina Rice is known for her dazzling audiovisual live shows, where fusions of electronica, ambient and IDM are accompanied by cutting-edge imagery. But compared to the likes of Jon Hopkins or Max Cooper, Rice has her own distinct style, which comes to the fore on this second album, 'Elision'.

On 'Third', ominous bass punctuates the thudding kick drums and interlocking melodies, while the electro beat on 'EXP3' underpins the swirling shoegaze vocal snippets and lugubrious melody. 'Momentum' is a slo-mo, trancey piece that will undoubtedly become a highlight of her live sets. Bordering on Editions Mego territory, 'FX1' is an exercise in experimental bleeps and noise. And 'Hunter' is all compellingly abstract clanks, clunks and clicks.

This blend of the obscure and accessible is all Rice's own, and 'Elision' is a captivating glimpse of her eclectic sound world. **BM**

MARSHA FISHER

Psychic Architecture

THE TAPEWORM

The two sides of Minnesotan sound artist Marsha Fisher's debut cassette for The Tapeworm contain haphazardly spliced loops of murky soundscapes and disorientating half-sentences, with each piece eventually unspooling its merry way toward slurring indecipherability.

Disconnected from their original spoken-word sources, 'Pet Flies' and 'Judgement' operate on the most extreme peripheries of comprehension, while 'With Envy' sounds like Alvin Lucier's 'I Am Sitting In A Room' – if the room in question happened to be immersed underwater.

On the B-side, Fisher delves deep into what could be (but probably aren't) manipulated chunks of orchestral or easy listening numbers, with the four tracks rendering what were once sweet melodies into hiccuping, ephemeral sprawls. For the most part, 'Fig Wasp' retains some semblance of its original architecture, before rapidly being atomised into quiet, unpredictable murmurs and distorted echoes.

A fun, freaky and adventurous lesson in wonky phonics and heavily processed sonics. **MS**

FROGMAN

Frogman

CASTLES IN SPACE

"Out in the fields yesterday, I caught sight of someone. He was in a sort of frogman outfit." Were you a 1970s child once terrified by the kind of alarming teatime drama that made you spit fish fingers all over the G Plan coffee table? Dean "I Monster" Honer and Will "Supreme Vagabond Craftsman" Goddard clearly were, and – coaxing a battered EMS Synthi back into life – have teamed up for what they describe as the lost soundtrack to a "dystopian series made for Yorkshire TV in 1978".

Set in a bleak corner of the Peak District, it's perhaps our only opportunity to hear a one-time mainstay of Pulp and a former cast member of 'The Tomorrow People' acting together in earnest. For that reason alone, surely, it must be cherished.

Submerged by analogue bleeps and beats, Russell Senior and Richard Speight throw themselves into two narrated suites of glorious post-apocalyptic oddness, originally released in 2018, but here given a welcome spruce-up for vinyl. Think 'Survivors' set in Sheffield or 'Z For Zachariah' on the outskirts of Hathersage. **BF**

THE COMET IS COMING

Hyper-Dimensional Expansion Beam

IMPULSE!

Cosmic light storm ahoy

Miles Davis and John Coltrane must look down from their exulted thrones in the eternal artists' paradise and flash knowing, beatific smiles upon Shabaka Hutchings and his fellow The Comet Is Coming cosmonauts. With the best modern-day electronic accoutrements at their disposal, what an exhilarating bitches brew of volatile magic, searing genius and sonic invention this pioneering sax, synth and drums trio conjure. Goodness knows what the trad jazz purists must make of them.

And yet, despite the suggestive hyperbole of the album's title, 'Hyper-Dimensional Expansion Beam' is probably the Comets' most expansive release to date. The breadth of mood and texture is typified by opening track 'Code', an intergalactic white-knuckle ride that pulls no punches with its maniacal, last-rave-at-the-end-of-the-world ballistics. As much as anything, it seems to serve as an initiation into the band's boundless aesthetic, genre-defying palette and the sheer cosmic ingenuity that follows.

Themed around coded meanings in both human DNA and technology, brass maestro Hutchings, keyboard magician Dan "Danalogue" Leavers and percussionist Max "Betamax" Hallett recorded their fourth long-player at Peter Gabriel's renowned Real World Studios in the West Country. And boy, does it show. The immersive depth of sound and vision served up here is something to behold, fully realising the trio's potential with a startling level of clarity, heft and attention to detail. Thematically, 'Hyper-Dimensional Expansion Beam' is a loose treatise on spirituality, the universe, AI and the power of the transcendental. No wonder that plugging into it feels like having a strangely exhilarating out-of-body experience.

There are brain-melting peaks, emotive and meditative twists (see 'Lucid Dreamer'), and moments of stupefying musicianship to revel in at every turn. The techno-mystic intensity of 'Pyramids' feels somehow purifying and euphoric, as Danalogue's technicolour synths channel Orbital while setting the controls right for the heart of the party. Then Hallett and Hutchings combine with breathtaking telepathic alchemy on 'Frequency Of Feeling Expansion', before Hutchings' riffing sax elevates us, via the bone-rattling 'Angel Of Darkness', into his very own fifth dimension of jazz. Beam us up.

CARL GRIFFIN

Brief Encounters

The Comet Is Coming's **Dan "Danalogue" Leavers** takes on our quick-fire question machine

Hello, Dan. Where are you right now and what can you see?

"Porto, Portugal. The airline just lost all our luggage, so we're driving through rural villages to pick up a spare Juno-60!"

What's on your agenda today?

"We're playing at a festival called Paredes De Coura near Porto."

Your 'Hyper-Dimensional Expansion Beam' album was recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios. What was that like?

"I've never seen so many outboard compressors in one place. Being in a large studio felt like a real progression from our earliest DIY recordings. There was a huge mixing desk and my dream tape machine – the Studer two-inch 24-track. We took Kristian Craig Robinson, who has engineered most of our records, to keep that sonic through-line, ensuring there was plenty of edge and colour to the sound."

It's a blinding record, with tracks like 'Code' and 'Angel Of Darkness' summoning an "end of times" energy. What are your thoughts on the state of the world at present?

"It's the best of times and the worst of times. An evolution of consciousness and inspiring technological advancements set against a backdrop of environmental collapse, corporate greed and narcissistic leaders."

The album has real cosmic energy, too. What's your star sign?

"Haha, love it. I'm an Aries – first sign of the zodiac, ruled by the fiery war god of Mars. I'm not sure how much to read into personal horoscopes."

You're an established act now, but how did you first meet?

"Me and Max [Hallett] met in Brighton and almost immediately started a band. We've now been playing together for over half our lives."

Didn't you share the same saxophone teacher with Shabaka Hutchings at Guildhall School of Music?

"Shabaka and I did share the same teacher, but didn't know each other at the time – we probably unknowingly passed each other in the corridor!"

Do you have a favourite jazz/fusion record?

"Mahavishnu Orchestra's 'The Inner Mounting Flame' or Herbie Hancock's 'Head Hunters'."

Your name appears regularly on our pages, thanks to your work as a producer and with other groups such as Soccer96, Flock and Floating World Pictures. How do you find time to sleep?

"With The Comet Is Coming and Soccer96, I'm obviously much more involved. Writing, recording, arranging, mixing, producing, touring… it's all-encompassing. Production on the new album totalled just over four months. With the other groups, it's more 'turn up and play' on the day of the recording. I have developed the ability to sleep anywhere, though."

If a comet really *was* coming, how would you spend your last day on Earth?

"I think by gathering together the biggest group of friends possible, playing music and getting into that altered state of consciousness. I'm hoping we'd be able to play cosmic pool and knock a comet off its course."

Buried Treasure

MIKE BATT

Zero Zero

EPIC, 1982

"Long, long ago, far into the distant future and after the seventh war, there is a civilisation called System 605. Where the diseases of love and emotion no longer exist to complicate our busy lives…"

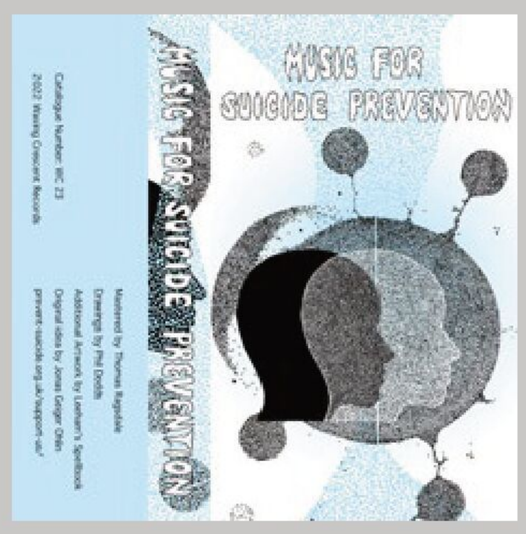
How did you spend your 1981? Staring longingly through a classroom window and praying for the bell? Forlornly inspecting the cards in an orange-fronted Job Centre? Repeatedly rolling your eyes at 'Shaddap You Face'? Don't worry, Mike Batt did the hard work for you. He was circumnavigating the globe in a yacht called Braemer and jamming 'On Ilkla Moor Baht'at' with Paul McCartney in Montserrat. And – on the Pacific leg – devising a brilliant Orwellian synthpop fantasy about a dystopian society that has genetically eradicated human feeling for the sake of autocratic efficiency.

Is it possible that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, on commissioning Batt to write a celebratory piece for their 50th anniversary, expected a few winsome ballads about Uluru and the Sydney Harbour Bridge? If so, they showed commendable sangfroid when Batt docked on Antipodean shores and threw himself into a startling realisation of his concept – a rock opera comprising an avant-garde, 40-minute TV special and an album that weaves experimental synth wig-outs into ambitious scores for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

"I was born Number 17 Romeo Delta 59," sings Batt in the vaguely Beatles-esque 'System 605'. "But you can call me Ralph… my friends do." The televisual setting? An infinite landscape of oppressive chequerboards with the downtrodden populace attired in similarly utilitarian jumpsuits. Ralph, of course, bucks the trend by falling in love with Number 36, a surgeon at his local correctional facility. The Numan-like 'Love Makes You Crazy', released as a single, is surely one of synthpop's bleakest expositions on the turmoil of romantic longing. Was Batt making metaphorical comment on the troubled politics of the early 1980s? If so, his outlook was decidedly glass-half-empty. "Don't touch me again / There's no smile on my face for you," he sings on the closing 'No Lights In My Eyes', the inevitable, heartbreaking result of the experimental 'Dance Of The Neurosurgeons'. Although the tears on the cheeks of the rueful Number 36 – played by Batt's long-term partner, Julianne White – suggest at least a glimmer of hope for System 605.

It's all a staggering gear change from 'Wombling Merry Christmas', and the British media seemed unsure how to react to Batt's new direction. On the 1982 Christmas edition of BBC lunchtime show 'Pebble Mill At One', in full Number 17 jumpsuit and make-up, he introduced 'Love Makes You Crazy' to a studio audience that included The Krankies. But it's testament to Batt's versatility and passion for music that he goes about his job with maximum gusto, unfettered imagination and an irresistible sense of mischievous good humour. Long may he continue to complicate our busy lives.

BOB FISCHER



VARIOUS ARTISTS

Music For Suicide Prevention

WAXING CRESCENT

Soundscapes start an important conversation

I recently completed a qualification in self-harm and suicide prevention, primarily in an effort to help a struggling family member. It was rewarding and helpful, but it's really disturbing that these topics are now so omnipresent in modern society that online training courses are available to everyone. The accessibility of such education forms part of a move to raise awareness of crippling mental health issues that have been stigmatised, misunderstood and, since the global pandemic, become an even more acute part of our everyday lives.

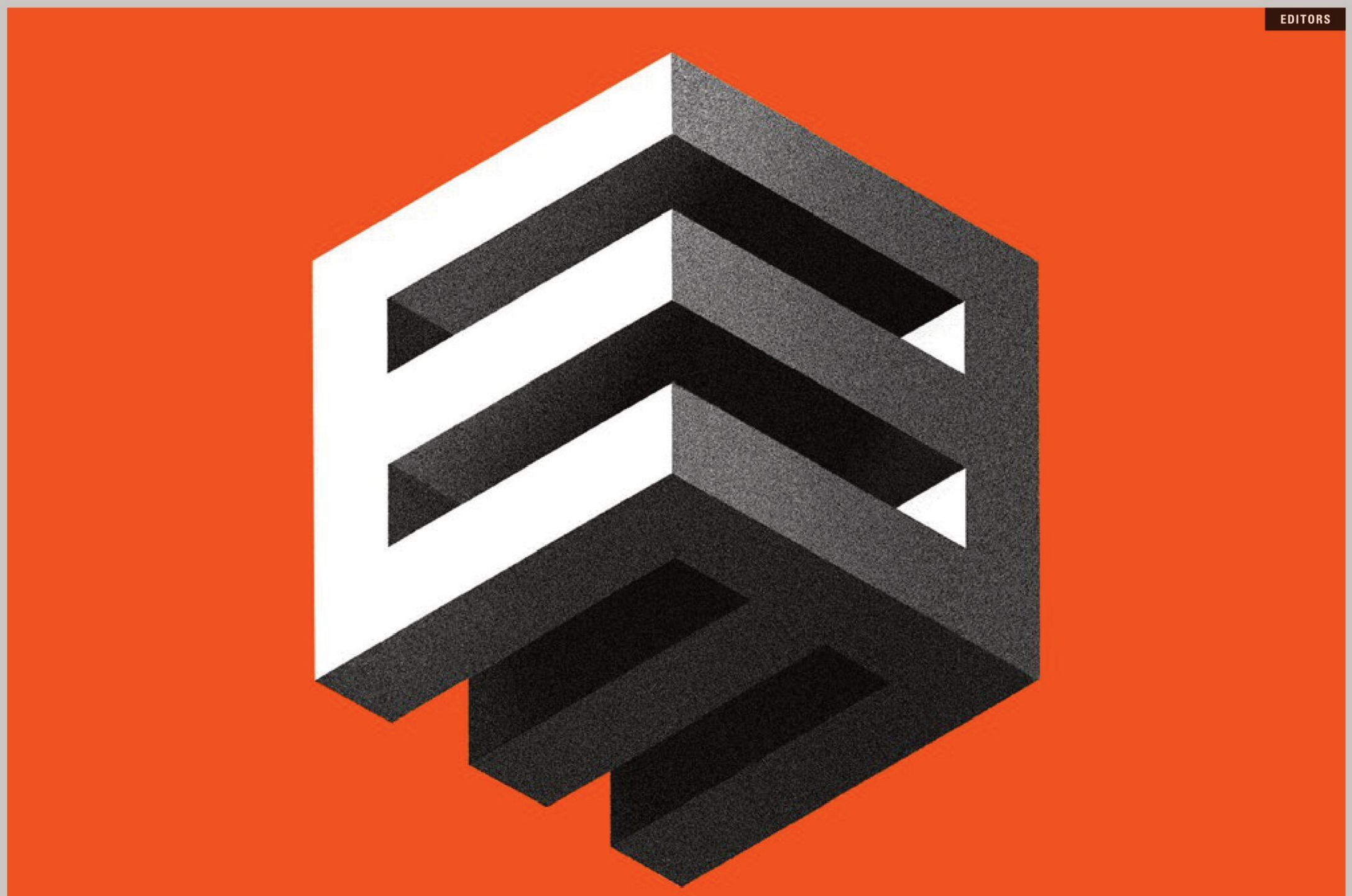
Waxing Crescent's compilation, 'Music For Suicide Prevention', can be seen as another aspect of a much-needed effort to normalise conversations about suicide. Proceeds from the album go to Grassroots Suicide Prevention, a Brighton and Hove-based charity, whose prominent 'Alright Mate?' campaign encourages men to talk to one another about their issues, thoughts and feelings.

For the most part, the tracks collected here occupy a sort of bleak, ambient earnestness – after all, this is a serious topic and one that should be approached accordingly. 'Forwards', the opener from Rupert Lally, is a case in point, freighted as it is with a haunting melodic insistence, while 'No Fixed Tomorrows' from Norfolk sound artist Audio Obscura has a searching, unresolved quality to its sonic structure. Elsewhere, Stuart Cook's metallic-edged 'Plagal Cadence' is a harrowing approximation of anxiety and desperation, which left me feeling appropriately unsettled.

There is plenty of hope here, however. Enofa's 'Bluebells' is a powerful and transcendent piece, built from a sweet swirl of pretty note clusters whose dissonant fringes avoid a sense of unbridled, misplaced optimism. 'For A Tooth' by Camp Of Wolves, 'Tremolo' by Sulk Rooms and 'Hylia' by Polypores all seem to owe a subtle debt to Vangelis' 'Tears In Rain', ultimately providing tentative reasons to feel sanguine, while at the same time acknowledging the often difficult path to get there.

This is a powerful and important compilation tackling a challenging topic, and one that Waxing Crescent should be hugely applauded for.

MAT SMITH



EDITORS
EBM
PLAY IT AGAIN SAM

Electronics have long since been an integral part of Editors' sound, but as the title of their latest album suggests, 'EBM' finds our heroes taking a left-field turn into full-blown industrial territory, with a synth-laden, enormo-rock edge that brings to mind the crepuscular swagger of Nitzer Ebb, DAF and Nine Inch Nails.

Following 2019's 'The Blanck Mass Sessions' – Benjamin John Power's retooling of tracks from Editors' 2018 album, 'Violence' – Power has joined the group permanently, and his bombastic touch is a logical progression for Editors' melodramatic oeuvre. Also an acronym for Editors/Blanck Mass – clever! – 'EBM' is a glorious sonic assault.

'Heart Attack' is the obvious anthem, 'Kiss' feels like a beefed-up Depeche or New Order at their brooding best, and the fabulous 'Strange Intimacy' even ends with a "mad, eight-minute techno odyssey", as Tom Smith's voice swirls through it all, veering from deep-down croon to soaring battle cry. Typically epic, it's as exhilarating as only Editors can be. With live dates incoming, you can certainly imagine Smith throwing his customary exaggerated shapes to this. Leathers on. **VI**

UNHAPPYBIRTHDAY
Stella Loops
TAPETE

German duo unhappybirthday are Daniel Jahn and Tobias Rutkowski, and on fifth album 'Stella Loops', they're joined once again by producer Jonas Meyer. Although they've been working in Hamburg since 2012, their sound stretches back a couple of decades, evoking the post-comedown Balearic house vibe of the early 1990s to the point where this album almost feels sonically conceptual, with many of the songs sounding like reverent variations of The Beloved's 'The Sun Rising' or Ultramarine's 'Stella'.

It's all there in the chirping birdsong, chiming keys, shuffling beat and murmured vocals of opener 'Nova', although the German lyrics are apparently inspired by the sci-fi literature of the GDR, suggesting edgier intentions.

Elsewhere, the rolling guitar hook of 'Eolomea' is particularly lovely, while the cover of Die Welttraumforscher's 'Lass Uns Überlegen', with its vocoded vocals and cosmic whale song, introduces a little darkness into paradise. Finally, Finnish composer Jimi Tenor adds some mellow flute on woozy acid reverie 'Jimmy' – the icing on unhappybirthday's cake. **JB**

BADGE ÉPOQUE ENSEMBLE
Clouds Of Joy
TELEPHONE EXPLOSION

Take Latin beats, twiddly Santana guitars, Stan Getz-inspired sax and the kind of over-enunciated harmonies that have rarely been in fashion since the glory days of the Swingle Singers. You'd make a giddy confection, but it would likely still lack the sheer elan of this fabulous album, helmed by sharp-suited Toronto smoothie, Maximilian Turnbull. Hearing he was to become the father of twins, Turnbull set out to create an album of pure happiness. And blimey, the infectious grooves on this gleeful platter could put a spring in the step of the most resolute miserabilist.

'Zodiac' is the lynchpin, a Stevie Wonder homage with James Baley's swooping vocals flowing seamlessly into Alia O'Brien's mellifluous flute. The title track could be imperial-phase Weather Report, and 'Don't Touch A Hair On His Head' has a whiff of Steely Dan… with keyboardist Edwin De Goeij seemingly an exact DNA clone of the late Walter Becker. "Have you heard joy?" coo those precision-perfect harmonies on the appropriately titled 'Joy Flows'. By gum, we have now. **BF**

NIGHT SWIMMER
Xia Ye
SHY PEOPLE

Night Swimmer is Chinese producer "Ethan" He Dengke, and 'Xia Ye' was inspired by a journey in the mountains near his Wuhan home. However, the album was produced just as the emerging Covid virus began to break out into a full pandemic, tempering those evocations of nature with a colossal anxiety that warps each track here like metamorphic rock.

'Silver Flying' takes the sound of running water, agitating and boiling it beneath sci-fi sonics, while 'Nature In Mind' coaxes whistling synths into patterns which resemble eerie, unnatural bird calls. But rather than descending into a kind of environmental doom, elements of traditional Chinese music – emotive flutes, reverberant chimes – neutralise the uneasy electronics into something less sinister.

While pieces such as 'Killing Time' and 'The Unravelling' initially feel a little dystopian, the glistening production contrasts beautifully against the florid sonic landscape, revealing subtle and engaging details each tme you listen. **ST**

OM UNIT
Acid Dub Studies II
OM UNIT

Capturing the hazy echo of the last bloom of summer, Om Unit's 'Acid Dub Studies II' album arrives with impeccable timing, showcasing more of the tried-and-tested formula that Jim Coles perfected with last year's 'Acid Dub Studies' record. Cosmic TB-303 trickery? Tick. Bottomless dub grooves? Tick. As for the studies part, Bristol-based Coles is short-changing himself. These are more than brief sketches, imbued with a sense of atmosphere and feeling that he's honed over years of skipping across drum 'n' bass, dubstep, hip hop and techno.

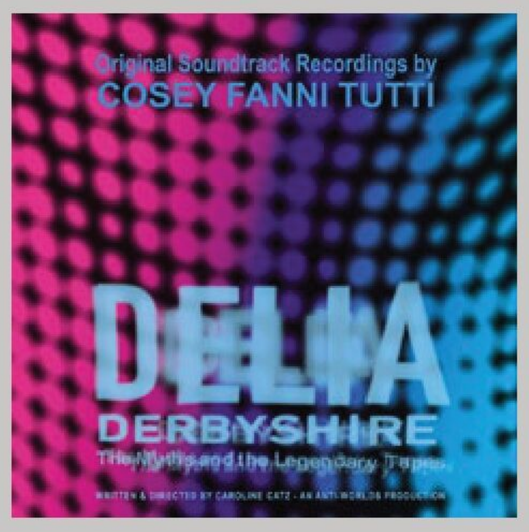
If anything, this second outing hits a little harder than its predecessor. 'Melted' and 'Camo' serve as gentle introductions before the shimmery, squiggly 'Strange Brew' gets its acid hooks in. From there, the album ebbs and flows through the melodic 'Electroacidspringwater' and the swagger and throb of 'Pursuit', to the dark narcotics of 'Valium Tempo' and the dub-wave smokiness of 'Liberation'. It's one of those albums (or in this series' case, two) that you can hurl superlatives at all day long, but best to just press play and take it all in. **CF**

BEOKRAFT
The Time Machine
DISCOM

Billed as the "Yugoslavian Kraftwerk", this supergroup of Serbian electronic pioneers comprises Dejan Stanisavljević of 80s synth-provocateurs Beograd, Zoran Jevtić of coldwave outfit DATA and Nikolaj Bežek of the Italo-disco-inclined Consequential.

Combining their talents for the first time, their mission here is to pay due homage to Düsseldorf's godfathers of electronic music. And, perhaps because they relieved themselves of any pressure to not sound derivative, there's a liberating pleasure in hearing their tribute, which, though delivered with breathtaking aplomb and interpretive guile, is also served up with a knowing, vocoded smile.

Each musician takes three songs that begin with Bežek's "core Kraftwerk" approach. On superb numbers like 'Transformator', it's all about simple musical phrasing, complex rhythms and big, bold analogue effects, nodding to seminal Kraftwerk albums such as 'Trans-Europe Express'. Further in, Jevtić fixates on the 'Tour De France' era with the belting 'Artificial Mind'. Like the rest of the tracks here, it's a total joy to behold. **CG**



COSEY FANNI TUTTI

Delia Derbyshire: The Myths And The Legendary Tapes

CONSPIRACY INTERNATIONAL

From one electronic legend to another

The decision to commission Cosey Fanni Tutti, most notably a member of industrial music explorers Throbbing Gristle, to create a soundtrack for Caroline Catz's 2020 film about Delia Derbyshire is one that made total sense. Both women came up against patriarchal attempts to impose highly restrictive confines on their creativity and personalities. Both hailed from outside London – Derbyshire from Coventry, Tutti from Hull – and had to fight against the inherent snobberies that came with that. And both, of course, also used, misused and abused technology to create and recontextualise new, unheard sounds.

This album is not merely music from the film. It's a collection of tracks inspired by Tutti's explorations into Derbyshire's musical and personal archives, and also her growing insight of the techniques Derbyshire used. It contains the musical sketches and experiments that led to the creation of the film's literal soundtrack, and yet, despite the advances in technology that have happened since, the spirit of Derbyshire's recordings loom large here.

'Sirens', for instance, sees Tutti employ air-raid sirens pitched at different levels and overlaid until new patchwork patterns appear. It's a reference to Derbyshire's theory that her love of electronic music may well have come from childhood memories of hearing the all-clear sirens during the Second World War. On 'Brainwaves & Clogs', meanwhile, Tutti creates similarly unsettling waves of echo to those used in Derbyshire's 1964 work 'The Dreams' – sounds that creep up on you, suddenly reaching the point of overwhelm.

It's not all eerie malevolence, though. 'Psychedelic Projections', with its bubbling analogue reggae skank, hints at Derbyshire's grasp on pop music, the flip side to her experimentalism. 'Snuff Chorus', a nod to her snuff addiction, has such a great pop hook hiding in its sonic collage that it's a shame it only lasts 40 seconds. Extended remix needed, for sure.

All in all, this is a respectful tribute to a true genius that doesn't forget – in true Delia Derbyshire fashion – to indulge in a few playful moments along the way.

BEN WILLMOTT

Label Profile

Label: Expert Sleepers
Location: Edinburgh
Est: 2020

Potted History:

"The label was a slightly mad idea for a promotional exercise for our music tech company of the same name," explains founder Andrew Ostler. "The thinking being, to release music that showcased what you could do with our products, which are mostly Eurorack modules and VST plug-ins.

"Initially, we were a cassette label – since then, we've done vinyl and CDs. Our hearts say vinyl, but our heads – which consider things like cost, production schedules and storage space, not to mention environmental impact – tell us CDs are the way forward. Releases so far have been a little scattergun in style – the linking factor is the gear, which can be used in any number of ways – but the whole thing is curated through my personal taste so it tends to be a bit off-kilter electronic, a bit ambient, with some raucous bits."

Mission Statement:

"Being a small company, it can change on the whim of the owner, but for now it's still releasing stuff relevant – however tenuously – to the company products. Also – physical releases. Most of our artists are probably releasing stuff themselves digitally already, but might not want or be able to front up the cash to do a physical release. We're very keen to create beautiful things which are just nice to have. I guess this is the Eurorack mentality, really – you could do it all in software, but it's so much nicer to have physical stuff to interact with."

Key Artists & Releases:

"We have this fellow called Andrew Ostler who makes great drone/Berlin School stuff," says Ostler, wryly. "Our latest release is 'Fallout 4' by "ambient stadium rock" duo Darkroom, which was 10 years in the making.

"And we're very excited to welcome Turkish composer Elif Yalvaç to the label, with her album of glitched-out ambient guitar, modular synths and cavernous contrabass clarinet. But every release is a key release, really! Every time you do something, you learn something new."

Future Plans:

"Keep on keeping on," Ostler affirms. "Because of our somewhat niche mission statement, we're unlikely to be flooding the market with releases. It relies really on people letting us know what they're making with our stuff. Does that sound like an invitation?"

Any Other Business?

"We're trying to foster a local electronic and experimental music scene in Edinburgh, which is sadly lacking in such things. To that end, we're helping coordinate a monthly night called Wavetable, pulling in artists from the local area, across Scotland and beyond. And that's definitely an invitation!"

For more, visit expertsleepersltd.bandcamp.com

First And Last And Always

Experimental composer **Sarah Davachi** on the first and last albums she bought, and one she always returns to

FIRST

THE SMITHS
The Queen Is Dead
ROUGH TRADE/SIRE, 1986

"I truthfully don't remember the first music I ever bought. I have older siblings, so I grew up with lots of inherited music. I went through the mixtape phase early on, recording stuff from the radio, and shortly after that Napster came along, which I used a lot. 'The Queen Is Dead' is the first CD I can remember buying with my own money. I got really into The Smiths, The Cure and Bauhaus when I started junior high, and so began the first of several goth phases I went through during my adolescence."

LAST

ELLEN ARKBRO & JOHAN GRADEN
I Get Along Without You Very Well
THRILL JOCKEY, 2022

"Ellen is a good friend of mine, and I have a great respect for her music. This album doesn't come out until late September, but the vinyl pre-order is the most recent thing I bought. Much of Ellen's music is instrumental and somewhat abstracted, but this album sees her work in collaboration to create an incredible collection of slow and minimal songs, featuring her gorgeous voice."

ALWAYS

JOHN FRUSCIANTE
To Record Only Water For Ten Days
WARNER, 2001

"It's impossible to choose – I have so many that are significant for different reasons. But in the context of physical albums that I bought and experienced in a specific way, this is definitely one of them. I got really into his solo music in high school, after a friend lent me this. He was releasing a lot of solo work in the early 2000s, so it was good timing, but this in particular has always remained a favourite. The CD lived in my car for a good few years."

SARAH DAVACHI
Two Sisters
LATE MUSIC

Majestic electroacoustics, with bells on

When I interviewed Sarah Davachi last year, she was threatening to make a prog rock album. "I'm not opposed to doing an album with the obvious prog connotations," she said at the time. "But I would actually have to make a concerted effort to not make my usual sound. Every time I approach an instrument, it always ends up sounding like what I do, which is the natural progression that I follow."

It seems we'll have to wait a little longer to hear the Canadian experimental composer in full-blown prog rock mode. There are – thankfully, perhaps – no noodling guitar solos or overblown theatrics on 'Two Sisters', her latest album and follow-up to last year's 'Antiphonals'. But 'Two Sisters', like all of Davachi's work, does exemplify the ambitious compositions, willingness towards experimentation and musical virtuosity that lie at the heart of prog rock. These qualities are all in rich, resonant effect on 'Two Sisters', the third release on her own Late Music label.

On 'Antiphonals', Davachi focused on the Mellotron, and before that, on 2020's expansive 'Cantus, Descant', the pipe organ. Here, she turns her laser focus to the carillon, a keyboard instrument comprised of large cast-iron bells, unpicking and stretching out its sonic properties to form an immersive atmosphere alongside a solo pipe organ, choir, string and trombone quartets, low woodwinds and a tapestry of sine tones and gothic-sounding electronic drones.

You don't listen to a Sarah Davachi record so much as become engulfed by it. Opener 'Hall Of Mirrors' begins with the imposing chime of a carillon that is the third largest in the world, its heaviest bell weighing approximately 12 tonnes. It's a statement of intent, a sign of what's to come. And on the nine extended pieces that make up 'Two Sisters', she goes to the bottomless depths of sound, suspending and elongating timbres and crafting a profound deep listening experience.

The vocal harmonies and electronic thrum of 'Alas, Departing' conjures a kind of secular ecstasy, and on 'Icon Studies I', the intensity of the slowly evolving reverberations seems to sink into your bones.

With 'Two Sisters', Davachi may have crafted another iteration of her "usual sound", but there's nothing usual about her ability to shape such magnificently emotive music as this.

CLAIRE FRANCIS

A TAUT LINE

Loss

DISKOTOPIA

After releasing essential music from the likes of Hyetal and Sseq earlier this year, Diskotopia label co-founder Matt Lyne returns with his second album as A Taut Line. The follow-up to 2017's acclaimed 'Distraction Provisions', 'Loss' is a meandering work that displays Lyne's broad musical tastes, as electronics, acid house, dub techno, breaks and ambient hues are all subsumed into a rainbow palette of sounds, forging one of the most versatile records of the year so far.

Highlights vary drastically, depending on your mood. 'The Scape I Float' garners attention for its high-tempo percussive bursts, placing it in the margins of footwork and jungle, while 'Life Force', featuring the saccharine pop vocals of Chocola B, hits the sweet spot like peak-era Massive Attack, its upbeat, summery trip hop tinged with a pensiveness that seems to strike the intangible "mono no aware" key. **FH**

THE ADVISORY CIRCLE

Full Circle

GHOST BOX

It's almost two decades since Cate Brooks became Ghost Box's first recruit, bringing the austere synths of The Advisory Circle to a party where cheese footballs forever reign supreme. And while her earliest recordings were fuelled by the residual trauma of 1970s public information films, later albums felt more expansive. 2018's 'Ways Of Seeing' even saw Friendly Fires frontman Ed Macfarlane adding soaring vocals to widescreen synthpop with a tentative toe in the early MTV era.

But here, Brooks has gone back to basics. The synths are starker, the tape hiss darker. 'Time Immemorial' is clearly the theme to some long-lost BBC Two science show, 'Just A Dream' feels perfect for a hard-hitting documentary about glue-sniffing. And the upbeat melodies of 'The Architecture' suggest the heartbreaking optimism of 1980s out-of-town retail parks.

It's an album of double-edged nostalgia for both her own fractured childhood memories and the label's inaugural experiments, and Brooks' knack of investing melodic electronica with affectingly raw emotion remains unparalleled. **BF**

HEKLA

Xiuxiuejar

PHANTOM LIMB

Often associated with vintage sci-fi films, the theremin is an esoteric electronic instrument few can master. But Icelandic musician Hekla is a virtuoso of this infectiously eerie and ethereal machine, and it's the primary sound on her second album, 'Xiuxiuejar'.

Hekla grew up in Barcelona, and the title means "to whisper" in Catalan. It's certainly a subtle and spooky record – partly recorded in Iceland, it has the darkness and mystic quality of that country in winter.

While 'The Whole' features Hekla's spectral voice and theremin in sublime synchronicity, 'Enn Og Aftur' has the crushing distortion you might expect from Ben Frost, and 'Tangarhald' is like a chorus of revenants singing outside your window, just out of sight. Augmented by the sounds of Hekla's heavily-bowed cello – her second instrument – the whole album is decidedly moody, but spine-tinglingly good. **BM**

WILLIAM ORBIT

The Painter

WARNER

This is uber-producer William Orbit's first new record in over eight years, and sees the one-time Madonna favourite return in captivating fashion, rediscovering the innovative electricity of his mid-90s peak with a distinctive sound full of melodic substance and emotive allure. Pulling in guest vocalists such as Beth Orton and Polly Scattergood, the latter's mellifluous tones on the towering 'Colours Colliding' capture the otherworldliness that imbues much of 'The Painter', while other star turns here lend the album an expansive global vitality.

Among the best are contributions from Tanzanian musician Hukwe Zawose, whose incredible voice is sampled on 'Heshima Kwa Hukwe', while Ghana's Gloria Kaba joins American vocalist Laurie Mayer on closing track 'Free Glo', an abstract and pulsating electropop deconstruction. It's a fitting climax to an outstanding album which manages to sound both thrillingly contemporary and yet somehow comfortingly familiar. **CG**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

'Visions Of Darkness (In Iranian Contemporary Music): Volume II'

COLD SPRING/UNEXPLAINED SOUNDS GROUP

This expansive compilation is a joint release between UK label Cold Spring and Italian label Unexplained Sounds Group, the former specialising in dark electronica and the latter dedicated to "investigating the experimental worldwide music scene". Their excavation of the contemporary Iranian electronic milieu is definitely thorough. Picking up where 2017's 'Volume I' left off, this second instalment offers 20 tracks and well over 100 minutes of listening time.

The style is invariably long-form and moody, covering cross-genre ventures in ambient, drone, electroacoustic/experimental electronics and musique concrète. There's a unifying aesthetic, an overarching shadowiness, and the tracks flow easily into one another.

The cavernous yawn of Reza Solatipour's 'Panic Attack' sits comfortably alongside the regal, haunting twang of Xerxes The Dark's 'Solomon's Throne', followed by Babak Sepanta's 'Ruin Is The Beginning' which charts a slower, more percussive club groove. A comprehensive tour through a field that is not so much burgeoning as established and thriving. **CF**

ALVIN CURRAN

Drumming Up Trouble

BLACK TRUFFLE

American sound artist Alvin Curran's 1975 debut, 'Canti E Vedute Del Giardino Magnetico' ('Songs And Views From The Magnetic Garden'), was a long-form drift through clamorous detritus and fractured melodic fragments, while 1983's 'Natural History' – re-released in 2017 via Black Truffle – was an occasionally caustic ramble through disconnected field recordings.

On 'Drumming Up Trouble', the composer and founding member of Musica Elettronica Viva taps further into innate playfulness, collecting works created between 2018 and 2021 alongside an "epic" piece from the early 1980s. They find Curran at his most excitingly wonky.

'Bay Area 1' flits between variously paced beats, like going through the presets on a Casio keyboard, while 'End Zone' arranges eerily reverberant booms into a slow procession. And on lengthy closing track 'Field It More', Curran creates new intersections between broken pop and concrete cacophony, as lo-fi percussion melts into garbled voices and turbine-like feedback. Difficult to categorise, but very easy to love. **ST**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Joe Meek's Tea Chest Tapes: The Telstar Story

CHERRY RED

Electronic chart-topper's 60th anniversary

Released in August 1962, 'Telstar' by The Tornados quickly became a global smash. By October, it had got to Number One in the UK, a feat repeated in America in January 1963, making it the first record by a British group to top the US charts. Almost certainly, it was the song's strident yet unearthly melody – played on the clavioline, an early electronic keyboard – that had so powerfully caught the public's imagination, evoking an optimistic future where technology might bring us closer together rather than lead to our destruction.

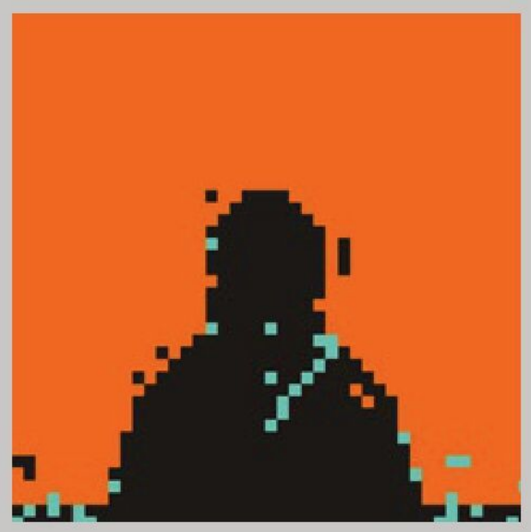
'Telstar' is the crowning achievement of Joe Meek, the eccentric production genius who worked out of a small studio in London's Holloway Road, and continually pushed the boundaries of what a three-minute pop single could be. When he killed himself in 1967, he left behind a vast archive of recordings that have become known as the 'Tea Chest Tapes'. Cherry Red acquired them two years ago and has been cataloguing and restoring them ever since. 'The Telstar Story', released on 10-inch vinyl, is the first fruit of that process.

It's an astonishing sonic document that traces the rapid development of the song. Inspired by the launch of the titular communications satellite, it went from an idea in Meek's head to a finished recording in just a week. In fact, the first thing we hear is non-musician Meek's own demo, where he vocalises the melody over a pre-existing track. His pub singer yodelling, swathed in reverb, is both comical and spine-tingling. But as soon as it's interpreted on the clavioline by Meek's sidekick Dave Adams, it instantly takes on that hopeful, magisterial glow.

The record features The Tornados' original recording of 'Telstar', prior to extensive overdubbing by Meek, and at this stage the clavioline sounds remarkably like a Stylophone, flashing forward to Bowie's 'Space Oddity'. There's a hint of the 'Star Trek' theme in its wordless warbling too.

Also included is 'The Telstar Sound Effects Tape', an incredible collage of industrial whirrings and sinister signals from outer space, and a demo of Glenda Collins singing 'Magic Star', a version of 'Telstar' with lyrics. Wonderful.

JOE BANKS



BLANCMANGE

Private View

LONDON

Evergreen synthpoppers hit emotional highs

This May, Neil Arthur tweeted a picture of his 2022 self sporting the Indian-style linen jacket he last wore in the 1984 video for 'The Day Before You Came'. And to the dismay of those of us whose own bodies have since turned to wobbly dessert, there wasn't a straining button in sight. But isn't that the ideal metaphor for this most resilient of synthpop outfits? Times change, fashions shift and yes, we all grow old. But, somehow or other, Neil Arthur and Blancmange remain the perfect fit for each other.

Since 2011's glorious comeback, 'Blanc Burn', there have been 14 further Blancmange albums of giddying eclecticism. But 'Private View' is perhaps the closest Arthur has come to slipping back into those old hit-maker clothes. Combined with the return to London Records, it's an album to warm the cockles of anyone raised on powdered food and 'Don't Tell Me'.

Don't be lured into the nostalgia trap, though. This is a record that very much reflects the post-pandemic concerns of a man who turned 64 this year. "Boy, am I tired / There's no reason why," he sighs on 'Reduced Voltage', while 'Everything Is Connected' is a charming rummage through a lifetime of encroaching domesticity. "Hang the washing out / Do the washing up," he grumbles, like a tabard-clad Les Dawson gossiping over the garden fence. "Feel like I'm morphing into something new or older…"

But it's the title track that's the tearjerker. Beginning with a nod to his mother's favourite household ornaments ("Beswick horses and the like"), it transforms into an intense plea to his late father. "What might have made you better? / What might not have been? / Let go, let go…"

As a grizzled Indiana Jones was once told, "We seem to have reached the age where life stops giving us things and starts taking them away". To reflect these concerns on an album so fizzing with musical vivacity makes for heart-stopping contrasts. And make no mistake, the pristine pop frameworks that Arthur has constructed with regular co-conspirators Benge and David Rhodes feel as fresh as the proverbial daisy.

The suit still fits, the buttons are brightly polished, and Blancmange – despite Arthur's proclamations of world-weariness – sound as vital as ever.

BOB FISCHER

REVIEWS BY
JEREMY ALLEN,
JOE BANKS,
CLAIRE CARROLL,
BOB FISCHER,
CLAIRE FRANCIS,
CARL GRIFFIN,
FREDDIE HUDSON,
VELIMIR ILIC,
MARTIN JAMES,
BEN MURPHY,
JOE SILVA,
MAT SMITH,
SPENSER TOMSON,
BEN WILLMOTT

DONGING ON

And this, gentle reader, is what happens when a grown man spends an entire weekend listening to Chuck Berry's 'My Ding-A-Ling' on repeat...

WORDS AND PICTURES: FAT ROLAND

Bell-ringing. Has it really come to this? I've written 47,000 columns for this wretched magazine and the only subject left to talk about is bell-ringing? You'd love that, wouldn't you? Me typing a column about bells while swinging from a rope in a crumbling cathedral spire like some kind of journalistic Quasimodo. I can't believe you're making me do this.

I have actually been actual bell-ringing, as it actually happens. There's an ancient church near me that was built by the Mayans or something. It's full of statues of old saints looking gormless. They never do a thumbs-up, do they, old statues? Miserable bunch. Anyway, this church has bell-ringing practice every week. So if you're knocking about the neighbourhood on a Tuesday evening, scoring drugs or selling broken fridges or whatever it is cool kids do these days, you'll hear the building burst into song. A weird song, mind you. Bell-ringing melodies make no sense. The dongs are all mixed up with the dings. It sounds like Squarepusher played by babies.

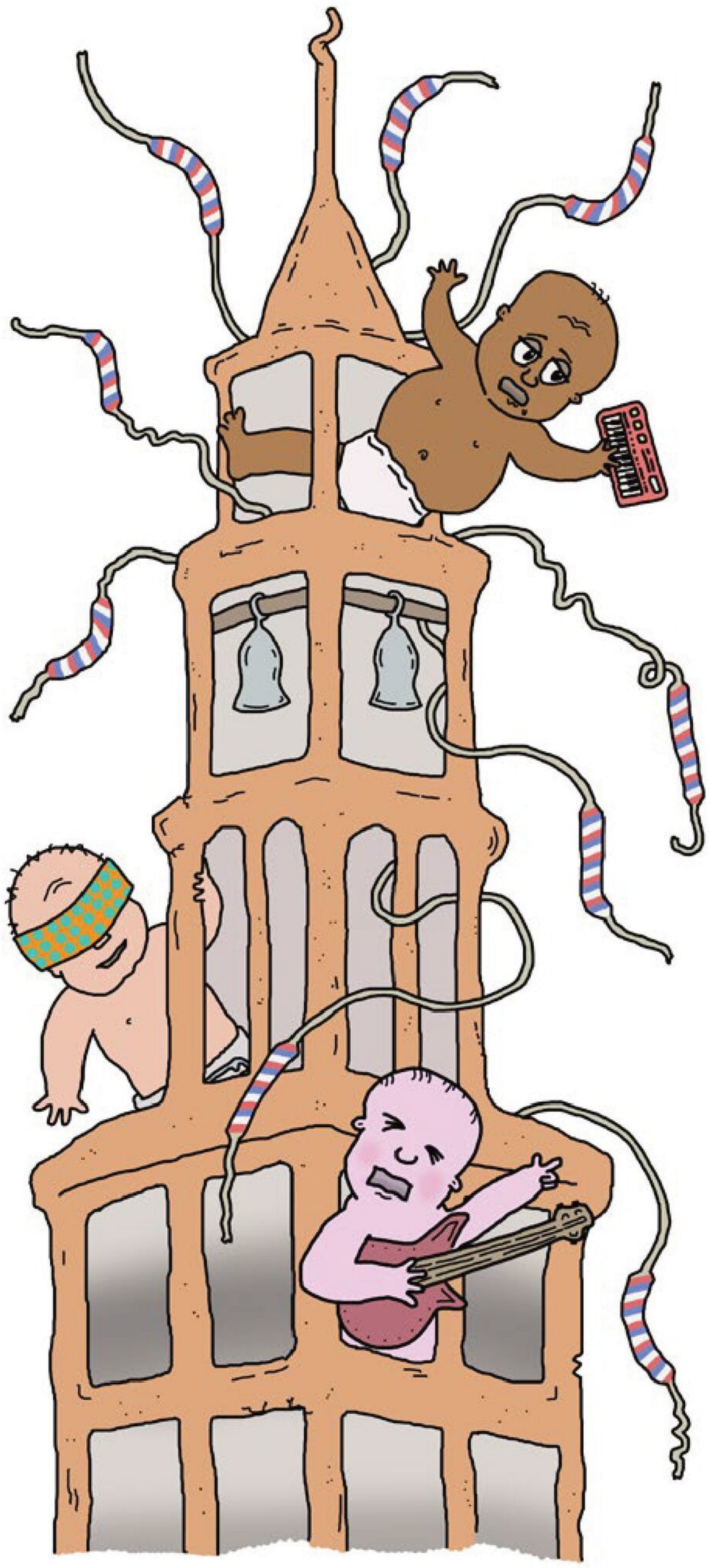
When a friend invited me to a practice session, I jumped at the chance. "I'll sort out those dodgy dongs," I thought. Turns out it's quite difficult. You climb up into the belltower and there are these ropes. Lots of puzzling ropes. You're meant to yank a rope and it peals a bell. A bit like pulling on a rhino's tail to make it hoot. Never done that? You should give it a try. The first thing they tell you is that if you don't let go after yanking, the pull of the rope will tear each of your 206 bones from your body. The second thing they tell you is how much the bells weigh. If they become dislodged and fall, you'll be crushed into instant jam. And not even delicious jam like wild plum or something with cinnamon.

Everybody stands in a circle and you pull a rope in turn. The regulars wear sandals and Christian T-shirts. They've got big arms because of all the yanking they do together. I have normal Fat Roland arms, so my muscles start burning within minutes. You don't get that with other instruments. No one has ever got repetitive strain injury from playing the triangle. And the practice session goes on for ages. We ring the bells in various formations and none of it makes sense. It sounds like a baby doing an impression of a baby doing Squarepusher.

What they don't tell you about is the delay. When you tug, the bell doesn't jizz instantly. The clapper has to do its clappy thing, so there's always a second or two until it bangs its dong. These are official campanology terms, by the way. It's infuriating because if you want to ring a bell, you've got to play it in advance. It's like having a synthesiser plugged into Ableton, but the computer's low on RAM so it lags like crazy. It's like DJing on belt drive. It's like having a delay filter overriding everything you do. It's like pulling on a rhino's tail, but then the rhino has to think about it before doing a hoot. I failed miserably. Could not get my head around it.

Bell-ringing is the worst instrument I've ever played. No wonder those statues look gormless. They haven't got good gear like a Minimoog. Or a bass guitar. Or a kazoo. I offered to patchbay the church belltower, but the vicar just looked at me a bit confused and asked me to get out of the font.

There. A column about bell-ringing. Happy now?



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